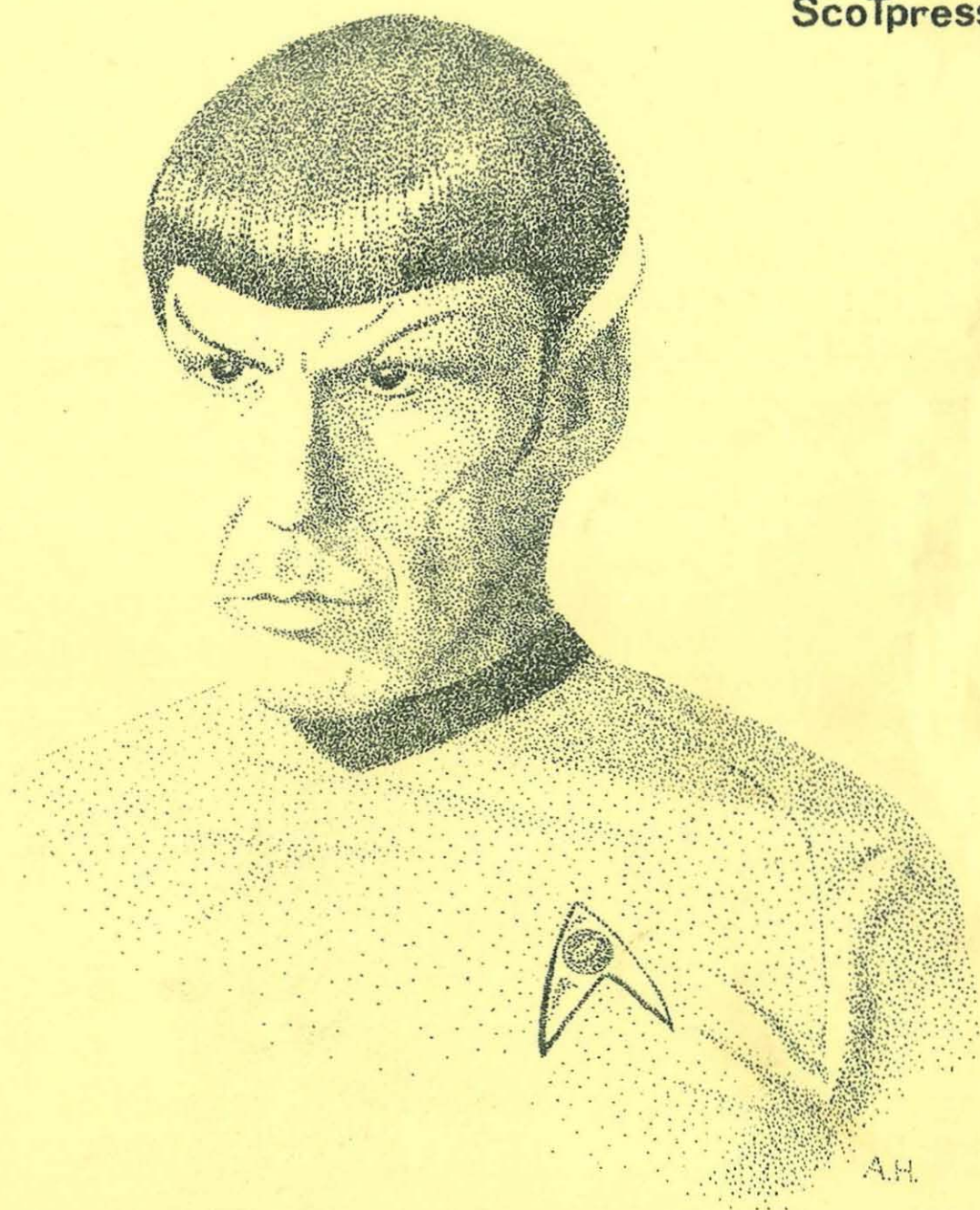


ScoTpress



**ENTERPRISE -**

**LOG      ENTRIES**  
**49**

a STAR TREK  
fanzine

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April 1982

ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

Hello, and welcome to Enterprise - Log Entries 49.

Three new names make their ScotPress debut in this issue, and we'd like to welcome Karen O'Riley and Heather Tracy - I hope we'll see more of their work in future issues. Doreen Dabinett needs no introduction to those of you who have read her excellent zine 'Orbit', but we're 'glad to have her aboard'.

The next issue of Enterprise Log Entries will be in August, and that, of course, will be our 50th issue. The long gap is due to the extra length of the zine, which means it will take us longer than usual to put together. We will still have zines out on our regular schedule before then, and an SAE to Sheila will bring details.

Work is progressing well on the 'special' issue; many of the contributions are in now, and I think you will be very pleased with the results.

At this point, I'd like to send a personal message of thanks to Ann Preece, for agreeing to help me out - she knows what I mean! Thanks, Ann.

As usual, I'm looking for contributions, and this time those of you who don't actually write or draw can help out. We need jokes - short one, two, or three-liners, to help fill the awkward spaces at the bottom of a page. They don't need to be good jokes - in fact, the cornier the better - but they should be applicable to the Enterprise crew. So, if you hear something really diabolical, please send it in - we'll be glad to give it a good home. As a taste of what I mean, I offer the following gem.

Kirk: What's the best way to mount a horse?

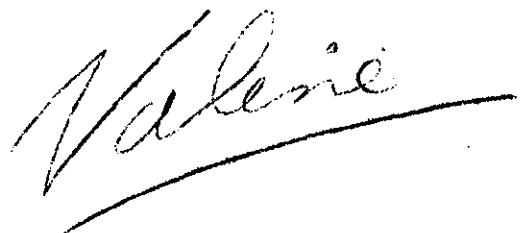
McCoy: How should I know? I'm a doctor, not a taxidermist.

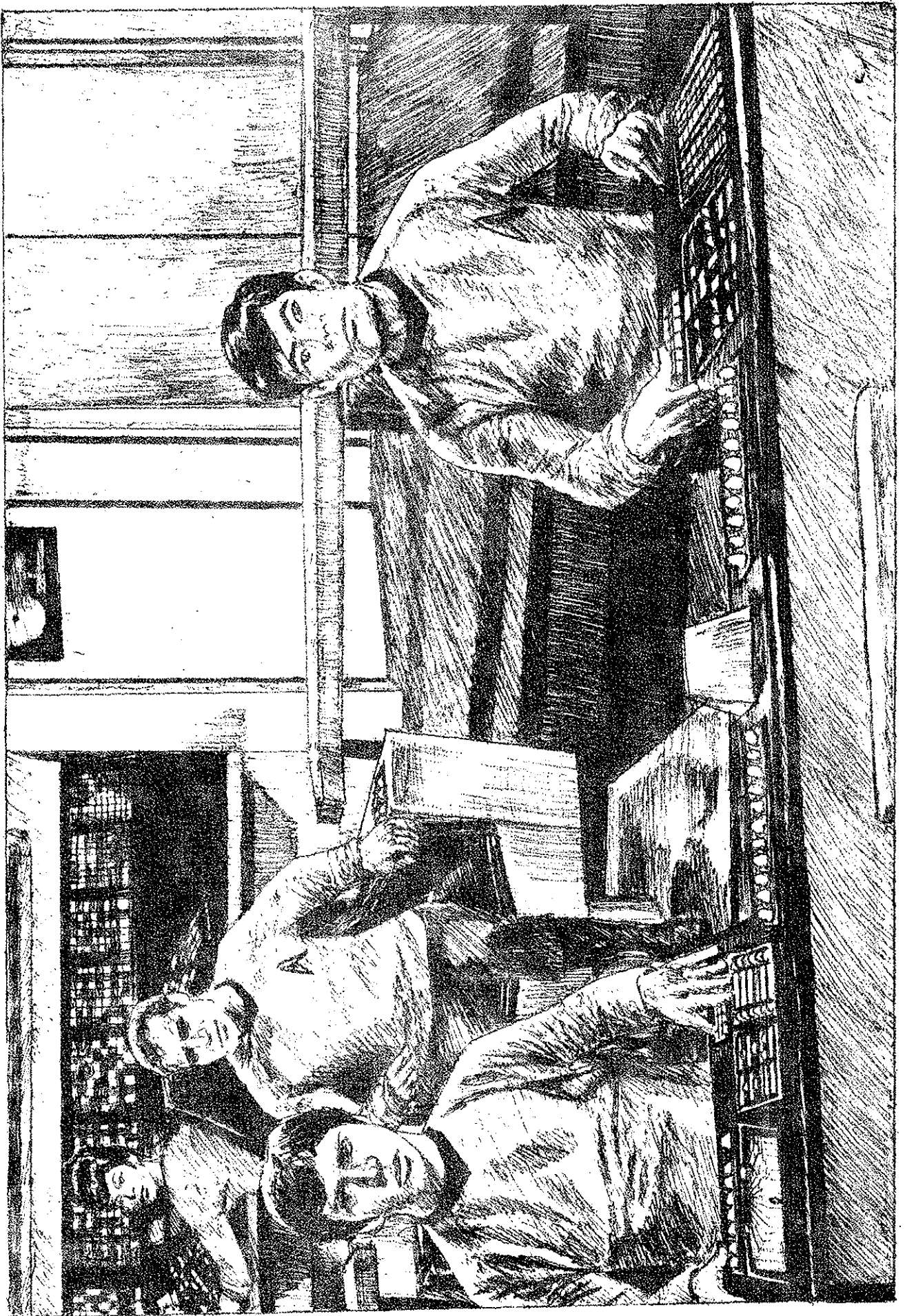
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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading 'Valerie', with a long horizontal line underneath it.





SHARP CORNERS by Vicki Richards

The powerful warp drive engines of the Starship hummed away sweetly, their familiar, comforting noise belying the vast amounts of energy they held. It had always amused Scotty to see the nervous - no, respectful - way that very new members of a starship's Engineering section reacted when they were anywhere near the great engines.

And so they should, thought the Engineer, thinking of the new Ensign he had been sent a few weeks ago; Prenton had been very much in awe of the engines when he had first arrived; but now he was settling down well, and would no doubt make a very good Engineer in time. The awe would remain, though. It always did.

Scotty was always aware, even in his sleep, of how his engines were running, aware instantly of any change, and fluctuation in the way they were operating, no matter how minor. And of course he knew their power, how lethal they could be if handled wrongly; but to Lieutenant-Commander Montgomery Scott they were his 'bairns', and he loved them. If the Bridge was the brain of the Enterprise, then the engines were her heart. They were also, in a strange way, his home and his family. He had to smile when he remembered how he had felt the first time he had boarded a Starship. A very long time ago.

But it was no green recruit he was waiting for now. The man who was due to join his Engineering section, albeit temporarily, was due to be appointed Chief Engineer of a Starship himself soon; probably of the Yorktown, if the Captain's grapevine was correct, which it usually was. He only hoped there wouldn't be any problems, having a man so close to having the responsibility Scotty had working so closely with his 'bairns'. Scotty was the Chief, and he hoped that Lieutenant Havers, or whatever-his-name-was, would remember it. Trouble was, from what James Kirk had told him, it was only too likely that there would be problems.

"He should have been made Chief Engineer a long time ago, Scotty," Kirk had told him confidentially when informing him of Havers' imminent arrival, "and why he hasn't is open to speculation. Officially, it's because there hasn't been a ship of the line needing a new Chief Engineer."

"And unofficially?" Scotty was becoming interested.

Kirk had looked at him, amused at Scotty's insight. "Unofficially it's because he's a little... um... difficult to get on with."

"Difficult, Captain?"

"Yes, Scotty. Oh, not that there's anything wrong with his professional capabilities - in fact he's reputed to be a first-class engineer; otherwise Starfleet would never have even considered him for a Chief. But then you know that. No - his problems are all in the area of personal relationships. According to what I've been told, he's inclined to... shall we say... rub people up the wrong way. Apparently he seems to think that no-one can do anything as well as he can, and wastes no time in telling them so. Among other things."

"Among other things? Can I take it, Captain, that he's a little - to put it politely - big-headed?"

"You might say that, Scotty; or perhaps we could just say that he's got a few corners which need rubbing off. Pretty sharp corners. And that's where we come in. It seems someone in Starfleet thought what Havers needs is a spell on a Starship with an efficient engine-room."

James Kirk certainly knew his men, reflected Scotty as he stood listening to the hum of his engines, and although he was not one whose head could be turned by flattery, the Captain's remarks about 'an efficient engine-room' definitely left a warm glow behind them.

So this Lt. Havers was apt to be 'difficult', was he? Well, Scotty had no doubt that a short spell in his engineering section would cure him of his bad manners. It better had do, for Havers' sake.

The gentleman in question arrived ten minutes late. It was not the fact that the long-range shuttle carrying him had docked with the Enterprise ten minutes later than scheduled that bothered Scotty; over the distance Havers had travelled the time deficit was not that serious, especially taking into account the magnetic storm the shuttle had encountered. What really bothered Scotty was the way his new lieutenant introduced himself; in one breath both respectful to the Engineer as his new superior officer, expressing his hope that his time on the Enterprise would be fruitful, yet at the same time being quite scathing towards the pilot of the shuttle, blaming him vociferously for his lateness.

Scotty felt just a little put out; he knew only too well that the shuttle pilot had used a great deal of skill to bring Havers and the shuttle through the magnetic storm undamaged, let alone only ten minutes late. He couldn't help but frown as he shook Havers' proffered hand; he could see already that Havers was not going to fit in all that well on the Enterprise.

Which was strange; Starfleet didn't usually think of promoting people with personality problems to positions of responsibility. Except Admirals, thought Scotty wickedly, remembering a joke young Chekov had told in the officers' lounge the previous evening.

However, over the next few days it became apparent to Scotty why Starfleet did consider Havers to be a prospective Chief Engineer, despite his ability to rub everyone up the wrong way with incredible ease. In the three days he had been on the Enterprise, Havers might have managed to irritate and fall out with just about everyone in Engineering, but Scotty had to admit that he really was a first-class Engineer, with more real ability than most engineers he had seen during his long Starfleet career.

To Havers also the engines were almost live things, as they were to the Scot; he had watched Havers listening to the almost subliminal sounds they made, which he had thought only he was aware of. And his skill was undoubted. By the end of the three days Scotty was almost admitting to himself that Havers might make a Chief Engineer, despite the fact that most of Engineering were now getting on each others nerves.

That was, until he was rude to Spock.

The Captain had been far too busy during the last three days to personally welcome the new crewmember, but now he did have a little time to spare, so he and his First Officer went down to Engineering to see how Havers was getting along. Kirk hoped he was settling down all right; Starfleet needed good engineers. He and Spock walked into Engineering to be greeted by a slightly harassed-looking Montgomery Scott, who immediately turned and called the new man over, without giving Kirk time to enquire what was wrong.

"This is Captain Kirk, Havers," said Scotty, somewhat gruffly. "He's come to make your acquaintance."

"Mr. Havers," said Kirk pleasantly to the perfectly ordinary-looking young man standing beside Scotty. "Glad to have you aboard. This is my First Officer, Mr. Spock."

"Thank you, Captain," said the young man, politely enough. "I'm honoured to be aboard." He then proceeded to ignore Spock completely. He didn't just forget to address him; he quite pointedly ignored him, almost as if he didn't think that he ought to be in the Captain's presence.

Kirk couldn't believe it. He had encountered such attitudes before, of course, but not among members of Starfleet; certainly not in someone who was being considered for such a position of responsibility as Chief Engineer of a Starship.

Kirk looked at him again, more closely; he had thought of Havers as a 'young man', but he wasn't much younger than Kirk, really. In fact, he wasn't at all like Kirk had expected him to be. Difficult, yes, as the report on

Havers had shown; but nothing like this. Kirk tried again.

"Mr. Havers. I said, this is Mr. Spock, my First Officer."

"Good day, Mr. Havers," Spock said non-committally. He had also seen what Havers was doing, of course. Not that he was going to acknowledge it; Spock was far too dignified. Kirk had seen the way his Vulcan friend had reacted to such ignorance on occasions in the past, and somehow Spock's quiet acceptance of Havers' blatant rudeness upset him even more.

Havers finally turned to the Vulcan and managed a somewhat stiff, "Good day, sir." Kirk didn't think he had imagined Havers' reluctance to say the last word.

"Mr. Havers," said Kirk in the command tone, working hard to keep his patience, "I hope you will remember at all times that every member of this crew, from myself to the newest Ensign, is entitled to your respect and cooperation. I trust you understand what I mean. That will be all."

Havers took his leave and returned to his work, looking just slightly bewildered, as if he didn't really know what Kirk had been talking about. Kirk was just going to let out a long sigh when Scotty did it for him.

"Scotty - is he always like that?"

"Most of the time, Captain," the Engineer admitted tiredly. "But he is a damned good engineer. Trouble is, is his ability worth the strain of having him around? Still, we'll have to keep on working with him, for all the good I can see that doing. What he'll be like when we pick up that new Andorian engineer from the next Starbase, I don't know."

"I see your point, Scotty. Carry on."

Spock's only comment on the incident was limited to a quiet, "It is to be hoped that Mr. Havers will come to realise the illogicality of his views, for his own sake. It is unlikely that he will receive promotion while he does hold such attitudes."

Kirk had thought how like Spock it was to think of it from Havers' viewpoint and not his own. It made him even crosser for his Vulcan friend's sake. Havers had better change, and change quickly; he was not going to put up with such attitudes on his ship. If he didn't get better reports from Scotty soon, Havers was going to be in trouble.

But James Kirk was far from the last person Havers was due to upset during the course of that day. It was several hours later, and he had put the incident to the back of his mind during the general business of the day. He was on his way back to his cabin with the purpose of tackling some paperwork he had been putting off seeing to since that morning, when his thoughts were interrupted by the sight of the Enterprise's Ship's Surgeon coming towards him. From what Kirk could hear - and that was a lot - McCoy was uttering a whole string of curses. Bones knew a whole load of varied and exotic ones when the occasion arose, and it did rather look as if Kirk was the person he was looking for to complain to about whatever it was that was bothering him.

Bothering him? From the expression on Bones' face, something was more than bothering him. It took a great deal to make the good doctor really lose his temper, but this time something evidently had. Leonard McCoy did not look at all pleased.

"Jim! There you are!" exclaimed the surgeon loudly. "I have got to talk to you!"

"Okay, Bones - I'm just off to my cabin. We can talk there."

"Talk! There's a lot more than talking needs doing!" spluttered McCoy. But Kirk knew Bones well enough to know that it was someone not present McCoy was really angry at. Kirk was glad about that.

McCoy didn't say much more in the corridor, but followed Kirk to his cabin and waited until the door was closed behind them before speaking again.

"Well, Bones?" asked Kirk, sitting down on the edge of his desk with his arms folded. He had to admit, he was getting a little worried as to what all this was about. If it had been in the early days of their friendship, he might have suspected that he had had another disagreement with Spock; but his two friend didn't have disagreements like that any more. And besides, Spock had never got him this mad.

"It's that damned new lieutenant of Scotty's!" McCoy almost exploded. "Jim, he's not fit for Starship service! You've got to do something about him!"

"Oh," said Kirk, rolling his eyes ceilingward in exasperation. "So you've met the incomparable Mr. Havers as well, have you? What's he done now?"

"It's more what he's said than what he's done," said McCoy, a little calmer. He could see that Jim knew what he was talking about - at least, the kind of thing he was talking about.

"And?"

"He came to Sickbay for the standard physical given to all new crewmembers. He was insolent, insufferable, insubordinate, and worse than a Klingon!"

"What?" Kirk didn't like the sound of 'insubordinate'.

"Well," explained McCoy, he was all right at first, if a bit stand-offish. So when I talked to him I tried to put him at his ease, like I usually do when a patient seems a bit nervous. That was when the trouble started."

"Trouble?"

"He didn't seem that willing to have a conversation at all, at first; but after a while I got him talking. I wish I hadn't."

"Bones, please," said Kirk with growing exasperation. "Get to the point!"

"It was when I asked him what did he think of his new ship and crewmates, Jim. He respects Scotty and you, but..."

"But?"

"He was damned rude about Spock! Downright insulting. And completely without cause. As far as I can see, Spock had done no more than say 'hello' to him. Jim - you should have heard the things he said. He doesn't think a 'point-eared Vulcan' should be allowed to be First Officer on a Starship!"

"Bones - you're upset because he insulted Spock!" Kirk suddenly had a terrible urge to laugh. "And I've heard you use that particular expression on occasion."

"Yes - but only as a joke! You know I don't mean it - Spock knows I don't mean it. But Havers did. Jim... aren't you going to do anything about it?" McCoy was beginning to get mad again.

Kirk stood up and began to walk around his cabin. "Of course I'm going to do something about it - but what? Havers is a good - no, a very good - engineer; Scotty confirms it. And while Starfleet can't even consider a man with such views for promotion - in fact they might even yet bar him from Starship service - they still think it's worth the effort of putting up with him for a little longer if there's any small chance of his views changing. And somebody must have thought so, or he wouldn't be on the Enterprise."

"Somebody? Admirals. Humph!" McCoy's views on red tape were widely known.

"All right, Bones - all right! I feel the same way! But what am I to do? Havers has been disciplined in the past, and it hasn't done much. Maybe I should ask Spock." Then Kirk stopped in his tracks. "Wait a minute," he said slowly, a grin forming on his face. "I think I have an idea."



Scotty watched as Havers left Engineering, carrying his tools, not bothering to try and conceal the displeased expression on his face. The doors closed after him, and Scotty grinned to himself. Trust the Captain to think of something! If he and Mr. Spock couldn't sort him out between them, no-one could. Anyway, at least the Captain's idea would get him out from under his feet for a while.

Havers tramped irritably down the corridor on his way to meet the First Officer. Why Mr. Scott, who he respected as a fine engineer, should assign him to help the Vulcan test the repairs to the damaged shuttlecraft computer, he had no idea. Of course, working on Starship meant that a prospective Chief Engineer had to know almost as much about computers as the Science Officer himself. Was this another test for him? Or maybe the Vulcan needed his help. That was probably it. Well, here was a chance for him to show his ability. He would do the job so well he would show up the overgrown elf.

Spock was already in the Galileo when Havers arrived. He hoped that Jim's idea would work, but he couldn't really see what the Captain hoped to achieve by it. Apparently Jim thought that if Havers was forced to spend a certain amount of time in his company, then his attitude would be bound to change. Spock didn't really follow Jim's peculiar kind of Human logic over the issue; as far as Spock could see, Havers disliked him merely because he was a Vulcan, so surely spending more time with him would only serve to make a person as narrow as Havers dislike him even more. But Jim seemed to think that it might do some good, and since Jim had asked, Spock had agreed. After all, Havers' attitude could not affect a Vulcan as it would some races. And the Galileo's computer really did need testing.

He noticed Havers walking towards the shuttlecraft across the floor of the hangar deck. From the expression on his face it appeared that his orders had gone down with the Lieutenant as well as Spock had expected them to.

"Lieutenant Havers reporting as ordered, sir." The man delivered the sentence as the duty it was. He then walked past Spock into the Galileo and began to take out his tools.

"It will be unnecessary to undertake any repairs until we are launched, Mr. Havers," Spock said evenly, under no illusions that his words would endear him to the engineer. "As Mr. Scott will no doubt have informed you, the computer malfunction only occurs when the shuttlecraft is in the vicinity of a magnetic disturbance."

"Why is it necessary to launch?" Havers asked coldly. Spock noticed that this time he had omitted the 'sir'. "Why can't the problem be studied in simulation?"

"Unfortunately," Spock replied, apparently deliberately not noticing that his wisdom had been questioned by a junior officer, "the fault does not show itself under simulated conditions. The repairs which the Science Department has effected can only be tested during actual magnetic disturbances. As you are no doubt aware, there has been a great deal of magnetic activity in this sector recently, as witness the storm you passed through on your journey to the Enterprise. Captain Kirk has received orders from Starfleet Command that we investigate these disturbances. Therefore we must launch."

Havers remained silent after this, speaking no more words than were absolutely necessary during the launch procedure. Spock, for his part, had never been one to waste words, and Havers' refusal to converse did not have the effect Havers wanted it to.

The Galileo II left the Enterprise, and Spock skilfully piloted the shuttlecraft towards the area where the Starship's sensors had detected the latest storm. He still could not understand how Jim hoped that Havers accompanying him on this mission would help the engineer's attitude, but for the moment he had more important considerations. The magnetic activity in the sector over the last few days had indeed been intense, and the orders to investigate tied in

well with Spock's own interests. The effects such storms had on spacecraft of all kinds were still not completely understood, and it was an area which Spock had long planned to study. He did not really expect the Galileo's computer to malfunction badly this time, as it had done a few days previously when Sulu, bringing back a research team from a nearby planet, had flown into great navigational difficulties due to the malfunction. Only the Helmsman's skill as a pilot had brought the Galileo back in one piece then.

Since then the Science Department had been to work, and as far as could be ascertained without flying the shuttlecraft, the computer was now in working order. Spock did not really foresee there being any likelihood of the malfunction recurring; the people in his section were, after all, under his continual scrutiny. And if there had been any great risk of danger then he would not have allowed the Galileo to be the craft undertaking this mission. But as it was, the computer needed testing, they had orders to observe the phenomenon of the storm, and he would have the opportunity to carry out some private research as well. As the Humans put it, 'Killing two birds with one stone'. A typically barbaric Terran metaphor, if Spock had ever heard one, but in this case apt, except that it would be three birds - four, if one counted the matter of Lt. Havers.

The latter remained obstinately silent all through the flight towards the centre of magnetic activity, restricting his utterances to those required by duty. Spock perceived that the Lieutenant was irritated by his lack of reaction to the snub. A strange Human trait Spock had never really understood.

Eventually their destination was dead ahead, a particularly large and violent magnetic storm. Already the Galileo's instruments were beginning to fluctuate, but no sign of the computer malfunction showed itself, and Spock was able to re-calibrate all instruments successfully; it was, after all, far from the first magnetic storm he had successfully flown a shuttlecraft through.

"Galileo to Enterprise," Spock signalled over the sub-space radio, making a final call before their proximity to the storm made further communication with the Starship impossible. "Spock here. We are now on the outer area affected by the disturbance. All the shuttlecraft instruments are normal. I shall now move in towards the centre of magnetic activity for better observation. Spock out."

"Kirk here," said Jim's voice over the radio, not quite as clearly as usual. "Good luck, Spock. Don't take any chances - that's an order. Kirk out."

Spock noticed Havers looking at him with a puzzled expression. He suspected it had something to do with the obvious friendliness in the Captain's voice as he had spoken to him. Good. If he was puzzled, it was at least a start.

Carefully Spock nosed the Galileo in towards the area of more violent magnetic activity. The shuttlecraft was buffeted a little from time to time, and more fluctuations began to show themselves in the instruments, particularly the sensors. Communication with the Enterprise was now impossible. It was nothing the Vulcan couldn't handle - he hardly needed a co-pilot, certainly not one as deliberately unfriendly as the one he had now. Not that Havers' attitude affected Spock in any way, naturally; but Havers' feelings might just prove a liability in a moment of crisis.

And that moment was to arrive very soon. Skilfully Spock had piloted the small craft nearer and nearer to the centre of magnetic activity, though of course he had no intention of taking the Galileo right to the very centre, even though his computations were working. His private theories on the nature of magnetic activity were holding up, his hours of research on the Enterprise computer enabling him to fly a shuttlecraft successfully further into the heart of a magnetic storm than any had done before. Spock was beginning to feel most gratified. For a Vulcan.

Then some very peculiar readings began to show themselves on the sensors. Spock began to attempt a further re-calibration, then stopped; according to his

theories, if he had done everything right - which he knew he had - then the reading had to be correct. But they didn't make sense.

"This is crazy!" It was Havers speaking, this time more incredulously than coldly. "These sensor readings don't make any sense at all. And I know your re-calibrations should have worked." The Engineer was speaking more to himself than to Spock, but he couldn't quite keep a vague tone of admiration out of his voice. Havers was intelligent enough to understand what Spock had been attempting to achieve with the instruments; he was also intelligent enough to realise that he would never in a thousand years have been able to theorise the results of magnetic activity as the Vulcan had done. There were only a handful of scientists in the whole galaxy capable of it. Havers was impressed, despite himself. Jim Kirk had thought that something like that might happen.

Suddenly the Galileo was struck by more violent buffeting, followed by the unmistakable impression that they were being pulled forward at great speed. Spock checked the sensors again, pressed a few switches, then frowned.

"It appears that we are being drawn into the centre of magnetic activity," Spock announced calmly.

"I can see that!" Havers almost yelled back. "What's happening?"

"It is a phenomenon I have not encountered before." Spock was busy with the computer.

"You mean you don't know?" Havers was getting worried; he might not like the Vulcan, but during the short flight he had started to rely on his ability. If the Vulcan didn't know, then things were beginning to look serious.

"In a moment I will have more data," Spock replied calmly. "The computer is functioning correctly." He did not add that without his theories he would have been unable to extract any useful information from the machine at that stage.

"Ah!" said Spock suddenly; to Havers he seemed almost surprised. "The sensors indicate, according to the data I have just run through the computer, that this magnetic storm is far more than just an ordinary disturbance. It appears it is controlled by an intelligence."

"It's alive?" Havers didn't like the sound of that at all.

"Indeed, Mr. Havers," said Spock. "It is."

They sat silent then for the next few minutes, for there was nothing they could do but wait and see where they were being taken. The Galileo's engines did not have the power to take them back, and Spock knew from previous experiences that they must not attempt any act which the intelligence might interpret as hostile. All Spock could hope for was that they would be able to communicate with their captor, to make it realise that they too were living beings. It was their only hope. Spock was broadcasting friendship messages over the subspace radio, but had no way of knowing if they were received or understood.

Then abruptly the Galileo stopped, almost throwing Spock and Havers out of their seats. The Vulcan didn't need to tell Havers that they had been halted forcibly at a very close proximity to the centre of the magnetic disturbance, the very heart of the storm. Except that both of them knew now it was no storm.

If it had anything that passed for a brain, then this was where it would be. Had they been brought here for the intelligence to examine them, or for it to consume them? It might well find some source of nourishment from the power that drove the shuttlecraft's engines.

Then Spock checked the sensors again and found that they had not halted; they were imperceptibly moving forward again. Their speed increased; they were not moving at the incredible rate of before, but it was fast enough. The computer was not making any sense now; even Spock's theories were next to useless so close to the creature's heart. Had it been a true magnetic storm, perhaps they would yet have had a chance, but Spock knew that once they entered the

whirling maelstrom ahead it would be the end of the Galileo, and those she carried.

"It's decided we're food!" Havers suddenly broke his silence again to state the obvious. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

Spock didn't even bother to answer him, hardly noticing that in their moment of greatest danger Havers was turning to him for help. He was too busy attempting to make the controls respond. It probably wouldn't work, but he had to keep on trying. Even at that moment the thought flashed through his mind that McCoy would have called his actions 'Human'.

"Can't we self-destruct?" Havers gasped. "Wouldn't that destroy it?"

Spock looked at Havers for a moment. The man had surprised him; he had more in him than would outwardly be suspected. But then Spock had long ago learned to disregard the face value of people.

Yet it was an action he could not take. The creature might not realise they were alive; they were probably too small for it even to notice. If it was intelligent, Jim would realise it. He would find a way to communicate, to prevent it causing further damage in the galaxy. If not, he would take the necessary action. Spock could not destroy a life-form so lightly, even if it caused his death. And self-destruction would not allow him to live.

He was about to answer Havers in the few seconds they had left when a miracle happened. The radio bleeped, and Jim's voice spoke.

"Enterprise to Galileo," said his urgent, if weak, voice; it barely sounded through the static. "Spock, come in!"

"Spock here, Captain," the Vulcan replied quickly. "I do not understand how you are able..."

"Explanations later, Spock," Kirk interrupted. "We're beaming you aboard. Now. But we can only take one at a time."

So Jim was leaving the choice up to him. Good. Jim knew how he would want it, even if he also knew the choice he would make.

"Beam Havers aboard, Jim. Now."

Spock had time to look at Havers' startled face before the transporter effect took him. Perhaps his action would help change the man's mind about non-Human species, though Spock himself would never see it.

Then he knew it was time for it all to end; there were no split-seconds left. But still he was; and through the confusion of the spinning Galileo the knowledge seeped through to him that he was no longer being dragged into the heart of the disturbance; he was moving again at incredible speed, but in a different direction.

The shuttlecraft was being thrown out, expelled by the creature. Whether it had recognised the fact that the Galileo was not food, Spock did not know. All he did know was that the shuttlecraft was beginning to come apart, being dragged apart by the tremendous strains and stresses placed upon it. He knew that somewhere, on the Enterprise, Jim would be watching. But there was nothing he could do. He could not hope that the Starship's transporter would operate again so near to the storm. Before he could think of an answer to something that cropped up in his mind, the g-forces became too much even for a Vulcan, and he began to black out.

Shortly after, the Galileo II disintegrated.

"If things like this keep happening," said Kirk wryly, "no-one is going to want to fly anything called 'Galileo'."

"May I point out, Captain, the fact that two shuttlecraft named 'Galileo' have perished in totally unconnected incidents is a mere coincidence."

Kirk looked at the Vulcan and grinned. It was exactly what he would have expected him to say; and there had been times that day when he had not expected to hear his friend say anything again. Once more it had been a very close thing. He didn't think he would forget in a hurry the look on Spock's face when he had regained consciousness in Sickbay a few hours ago. Spock really hadn't expected to see that place again.

"It was most commendable of Mr. Chekov to use my own research to aid us," Spock was saying thoughtfully. "Most resourceful; he deserves our thanks."

"And a commendation, which is already on his record," replied Kirk. "But without your research into magnetic storms, he and Scotty would never have been able to get the computer and the transporter to work properly at the crucial moment. A lot of scientists are going to be very interested in that."

"And it seems that the creature did realise it came close to destroying sentient life, or it would not have expelled the Galileo; nor would it have left the area immediately as it did." Spock was thoughtful. "Yet it is strange that Mr. Chekov has been unable to track it."

"Well, you can have a try yourself when we get to the Bridge," said Kirk as they stepped into a turbolift, "but I have a feeling you won't find it either - I think it's gone back to wherever it came from. I think we'll only have ordinary magnetic storms to deal with in future."

"Perhaps, Captain." Spock hoped that his friend's instincts were right; they usually were. "And Havers? How is he?"

Kirk gave a small sigh; they had come so close to rehabilitating the man. In fact, from what he had seen of him the last few hours, James Kirk had a feeling that Havers would never be quite so insufferable again.

"Captain?"

"Sorry, Spock - I was just thinking. I had some news a little while ago, and it's such a damned shame. When we were so close to knocking him into shape... and especially after what you did. I hate to lose a potentially good crewman."

Spock gave him a questioning look.

"I just had a message from Starfleet, Spock," Kirk told his friend. "Seems they finally gave up on Havers, good engineer or not. Something he did on his last assignment has only just filtered through to them, apparently. It came to light that he had made life so impossible for an Andorian colleague, also a promising engineer, that the Andorian finally resigned from his post and returned to his home planet, having decided that Humans were too impossible to work with. Perhaps Havers' attitude has changed enough now to prevent such a thing happening again, but I'm afraid it's too late for his Starship career. He's to leave the Enterprise, and be re-assigned. To a Starbase. Havers is going to be lucky if he ever sees Starship service again. I hate to lose the man now - he really does have the makings of a fine Chief Engineer. And I have to admit, I'm not looking forward to telling him."

"Do you wish me to speak to him, Jim?"

"No thanks, Spock. One of the Captain's duties. Besides, you've already done enough. Come on; we've got work to do."

The turbolift halted and the doors opened on the centre of activity that was the Enterprise Bridge. The two men stepped out and went to their own stations, each knowing what it would mean to him, or to any one of the Enterprise crew, if they were no longer permitted to travel between the stars. Havers' punishment for past misdeeds was indeed severe.

But for the Captain of the Enterprise and his First Officer, and for a certain Ship's Surgeon, there would always be the stars. It was the place they were meant to be.

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ROCKFALL by Karen O'Riley

"Jim! Look out!"

A low rumble overhead made Kirk look up, but he was too late. The rockfall engulfed him.

McCoy could only look on in horror as the rocks slowly buried him; Spock began racing towards the mass of rubble where he began his task of finding Kirk.

McCoy ran after him. As he reached the frantic First Officer he caught sight of a hand. "Spock!" he cried, quickly taking hold of it and trying to find a pulse. For a few heart-wrenching seconds McCoy, for the first time in his medical career, couldn't find it - but there it was, weak but present. He looked up at Spock. "He's alive!"

Spock carefully removed the heavier rocks, while McCoy had to be content with rolling away the smaller ones. At last they uncovered him, dirt-smeared and bleeding.

McCoy bent over Kirk's apparently lifeless form, and after a few agonising minutes Spock was told, "As far as I can tell without my medikit he has a broken leg, broken ribs, and possibly a fractured skull. His arrow wound is bleeding again..."

The sky was turning a delicate shade of mauve and pink. "It's growing dark," said Spock as he gazed up at the evening sky, in which, in any other circumstances, he would have taken great pleasure. "We must find a sheltered place for the night. Can he be moved?" he asked, trying to hide his deep concern.

"It would be better to set his leg first," answered McCoy. "I'll need some strong branches."

Spock had already risen and was in search of some vegetation. He found a few bushes growing on a ledge and proceeded to tear off two good-sized branches, with more force than was necessary. He brought them back to McCoy, who started putting them in place. Spock then took off his shirt.

"What are you doing?" asked McCoy.

"You will need something to hold the branches in place."

"But you're more susceptible to the cold. I'll rip mine up..."

"The Captain needs it more than I, Doctor." Spock proceeded to rip up his shirt, and McCoy let him - he knew Spock wanted to do something.

His leg in a splint, Kirk was carefully carried to a small cave Spock had found, and McCoy tried to make him as comfortable as possible - he was starting a fever. McCoy figured that the arrow must have been poisoned.

"We should be safe here for the moment," said Spock, looking down the mountain towards the village. "There is a taboo on this mountain - 'The Devil Mountain', I believe I heard them call it." He returned to where Kirk was lying. "I suggest you get some sleep, Doctor," he went on, seeing McCoy stifle a yawn. "I will keep watch."

"I won't argue," said McCoy, and settled down for the night. "I don't suppose you found any water while you were looking around?" he asked.

"No," was Spock's reply.

It had all started with the discovery of a large deposit of dilithium crystals. Kirk had been ordered to negotiate with the inhabitants of Nevra for Federation mining rights. The only problem was that they had been out of contact with the rest of the galaxy since their ancestors had colonised the planet a couple of centuries ago. They had been left to their own devices until now.

Kirk, Spock and McCoy and two Security personnel had beamed down to the area and entered the nearest village where Kirk hoped to come to some agreement with the inhabitants. However, they found a strange welcoming committee. The village had reverted back to a superstitious level of Christianity akin to that prevalent during the Middle Ages on Earth, and someone, having seen them beam down, mistook Spock for the Devil. The villagers had destroyed their communicators and phasers, and had locked them up ready for a very unpleasant death. The Enterprise crew weren't planning on sticking around, but during their escape the two Security men had been killed, and Kirk had been shot. They were traversing the mountains when the rockfall had occurred.

Spock looked at Kirk, who was sweating profusely and murmuring. He touched his forehead, and was not surprised to find it burning. Kirk opened his eyes at the touch, his vision hazy with pain. He blinked several times to try and focus.

"Spock?" he croaked.

"I'm here, Jim," he replied softly.

"Where are we? Where's the Enterprise?"

Yes, where was the Enterprise? Spock had thought that since they had failed to report a search party would have beamed down and found them by now. The only conclusion he could draw was that the Enterprise was no longer there.

Spock was saved from answering, for Kirk had started to ramble. Soon his eyelids slowly lowered. Spock, realising that he had been gripping Kirk's hand between his own, carefully released it and leaned back. The fire had long since gone out, for Spock didn't want to leave Kirk alone, or wake McCoy to get more wood. He was beginning to miss his shirt, though. Kirk seemed to be sleeping peacefully - perhaps that was a good sign.

But he was wrong. When the dawn broke in resplendent glory Kirk was worse - much worse. His body was racked with bouts of uncontrollable shivering, and the heat he gave off was enough to roast a chicken.

Spock had tried without any success to find food and water, and decided that if they were not picked up in the next 24 hours he would have to see what was beyond the pass, or risk going down the mountain.

McCoy was worried. If the arrow was poisoned then Kirk's fever could only lead to one possibility - death. He also knew that unless they were rescued or water found soon, they wouldn't last long. He didn't voice his thoughts to Spock - he guessed that Spock already knew.

Spock was very worried about Kirk, although he didn't show it. Fear was eating away at his heart, and he couldn't stop it. He had never been so close to a person before. Kirk was like the brother he had never had, and if he lost him...

Spock changed his line of thought. No good dwelling on the inevitable.

Inevitable? No. Spock couldn't help hoping, although logic dictated that he should not. The Enterprise would have rescued them by now if they could...

It was no good. His thoughts kept racing back to the present - and Kirk. He gazed at him, and remembered things past... He started to recite mathematical equations to take his mind off the present, and his feeling of helplessness.

By evening McCoy was weak with hunger and his stomach was complaining bitterly. Both his and Spock's throats were bone-dry. Kirk was becoming weaker and weaker.

The night air was cooling rapidly, and the sky had turned grey. From his position in the cave McCoy could see the village dimly, and soon his eyes

closed, although he was supposed to be keeping watch. As sleep took hold of his body, sounds filtered into his brain, strange sounds. The sounds of...

At once he was awake. His eyes opened and he ran to the cave entrance. Spock woke up, and checked on Kirk before asking McCoy what was wrong.

"Well, either I'm hallucinating, or they've come for us!"

Spock jumped up. "The Newrans?" he asked worriedly.

"No, no! The Enterprise!"

Spock listened. Sure enough there was the sound of boots, and of lowered voices, one of which was clearly distinguishable.

"Scotty! We're here!" cried McCoy. "Damn this darkness! Can't see them."

Then a shape loomed up in front of them. "Dr. McCoy! Are ye all right? Where's the Captain?"

"I'm fine, and Spock's all right, but the Captain's in a bad way. I think it was a poisoned arrow. I've got to get him to the Enterprise."

"No sooner said than done," said Scotty, flipping his communicator open.

It didn't take McCoy long to find an antidote for the toxin was simple - although deadly. Kirk's vital signs finally returned to normal, and McCoy was relieved when he finally fell into a deep sleep, his injuries attended to.

When Kirk started to come round Spock was by his side. Never once had he shown the intense anxiety he had felt for his closest friend and Captain, but when Kirk finally opened his eyes, his brain foggy with sleep, he was sure that he saw a trace of a smile on his First Officer's lips.

"Spock," said Kirk, grinning sleepily, and clasped his hand tightly. Their eyes locked in mutual understanding. "How long...?"

"Five days," was Spock's reply.

"What happened to the Enterprise?"

"There was an unavoidable transporter malfunction."

"My head's throbbing."

"I should think so," came McCoy's voice. Kirk's eyes focussed painfully on the doctor hovering in the background. "You sustained a poisoned arrow wound, I thought at one stage that your skull was fractured, and you managed a broken leg and some broken ribs while you were at it. Not to mention a few good-sized bruises - especially one on the..."

"I get the picture," interrupted Kirk. "How long will I be in here?"

"I'll keep you for as long as necessary, if not longer."

Kirk sighed, and resignedly settled back.

"I have to go now, Jim," said Spock softly, but he didn't release his hand. Kirk's eyes darted towards him, a look of disappointment momentarily crossing his face.

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry, Spock. Can't have you neglecting command, can we?" said Kirk, loosening his hold so that only their fingers were touching.

"I will visit you later," said Spock reassuringly. Kirk smiled, and he left.

"Is there anything wrong with Spock?" asked Kirk worriedly. "He looks ill."

"He always looks ill to me," replied McCoy. "No, he just caught the Vulcan equivalent of a cold. Nothing for you to worry about. This'll help you get some rest."

The familiar hiss of a hypo finished McCoy's speech, and as sleep took hold of him Kirk heard the doctor say, "It's good to have you back, Jim." McCoy gazed at Kirk's sleeping form, a contented expression on his face.

"Honestly, Bones, I'm fine."

"And I say you're not."

"Look, I've been cooped up here for weeks now, and I want out."

"You are staying put!"

"Sorry, Bones - I didn't quite catch that," said Kirk, hobbling out of McCoy's grasp. But Spock entered, barring his exit.

"Come on, Spock - let me pass," said Kirk.

"What appears to be the trouble, Doctor?" asked Spock instantly, ignoring Kirk.

"This stubborn, pig-headed Captain insists on discharging himself before I've declared him medically fit for duty, that's what!" shouted McCoy, on the verge of hysteria.

"Doctor McCoy, I fail to see the need for you to raise your voice when I am only a few feet away."

"It's known as frustration, Spock."

"I agree with the doctor," said Spock. "If he says you are still unfit..."

"But I'm as fit as a fiddle!"

"Surely Doctor McCoy is the best judge of that?"

Kirk looked at McCoy; McCoy pointed to the couch.

"Spock," he pleaded, but Spock was unmoved. Kirk limped defeatedly back to the couch where he sat, beaten.

"Now, if you will excuse me, I have some business to attend to," said Spock, turning to leave.

"Traitor!" yelled Kirk, throwing a pillow at Spock and narrowly missing a startled Nurse Chapel.

"Control yourself, or I may have to sedate you," warned McCoy menacingly, waving an ominous hypo, a twinkle in his eye.

At once Kirk settled back obediently. McCoy grinned - Kirk was at his mercy.

\*\*\*\*\*

# ETERNITY

I am  
the past... the future... now  
I am  
what was... and is... will be  
I am  
the before... the after... being  
I am  
ETERNITY

Ann Smith

\*\*\*\*\*



SURVEY

Quiet this land,  
 Empty of disturbance  
 Save for the wind and rain.  
 The silent growing plants spread out  
 To dominate,  
 Not ate or weaved or trampled.  
 Before our eyes  
 Such struggling  
 As Earth might once have known.  
 Arrives some humble water dweller,  
 Slapping water, beating pebbles,  
 Heaving, gulping, struggling,  
 From the sea towards the sky.

our memory.  
 For all time data stored,  
 Witnessed and recorded,  
 Gives meaning to our exploration,  
 Reason for our searching.  
 While this remains  
 We'll not have wasted lives  
 Or be forgot.  
 Once as we were honoured  
 By those first few steps,  
 Returning man,  
 Upon this world,  
 Perhaps will see not crawling beast  
 But thinking being.

Gillian Catchpole

\*\*\*\*\*

RE-ENCOUNTER

Too many years have passed since our  
 Last meeting.  
 Years in which we have led separate lives,  
 Existed on different levels.  
 But through all that time I often thought of you,  
 Missing your steadfast presence.  
 You were right, or course, to choose your own future  
 When I chose that offered me by Starfleet.  
 I was foolish enough to believe I could be happy  
 Commanding a desk.  
 But you knew. You knew I would soon miss the  
 Challenge of active duty, and long to leave this world  
 Again.  
 And you? You resigned your commission to return home.  
 You could have had our ship. But no.  
 You felt that without me Starfleet held nothing.  
 I see your parents rarely, and have heard nothing of you -  
 Until now.  
 Now you have returned in our hour of need -  
 My need - returned to assist us in any way.  
 But you have changed, and for the first time since  
 That Day, I can truly see how my  
 Actions of that day of parting must have affected you.  
 I pray that you might forgive me and lower those  
 Impenetrable Vulcan shields to accept this  
 Small measure of friendship I offer -  
 My life.

Barry Maxwell

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THE FINAL ORDERS by Doreen Dabinett

As Kirk left the Bridge at the end of his watch, he still felt ridiculously happy and hyped up; he knew he would never be able to sleep tonight till he had got rid of the pent-up emotions still churning in his guts that still held him captive.

He made his way to Mat Room 4 and found Security Chief Matthews waiting for him as requested. An hour later he emerged from the shower, tingling, bruised, and completely relaxed. He even managed to chat amiably to Commissioner Ferris in the Rec Room before he made his way to his own quarters.

Glancing over at his desk, he was surprised to see the reports of his senior officers waiting for him. He had not expected them till tomorrow. Looking at the chronometer he saw that it was still fairly early; he walked to his cupboard, poured a stiff drink and sitting down, slid the visi-tape into the viewer...

McCoy headed for the Captain's quarters. He didn't often get summoned officially in a non-medical capacity. He pressed the buzzer and waited.

"Come," the familiar voice called.

"Hi, Jim."

"Doctor. Please sit down." The tone was formal, and McCoy's smile wavered slightly as he obeyed, the blue eyes questioning.

"I think you know why you're here." Kirk's voice was almost cold.

"No, Captain, I don't," McCoy admitted, and crossing his legs he waited expectantly.

Kirk picked up a small tape from his desk and waved it in the air. "I've been scanning the reports of the landing party."

"It wasn't any picnic, Jim."

"I'm more than aware of that, Doctor."

"So, what's worrying you?" The Doctor sat forward, his eyes narrowing. "Come on, Jim, it's me. Let's have it straight, huh? What's bugging you?"

"You are bugging me, McCoy; and Boma, but I'll see him tomorrow."

"Me?" His face mirrored his surprise.

"For Pete's sake, Doctor, stop looking so damned innocent!" Kirk's chair shot back and he stood up, obviously agitated.

"Okay Captain, calm down." The Doctor was looking worried now, "And tell me what I'm supposed to have done?" He stared at the taut back of his friend.

Kirk's fist hit the bulkhead, hard. "I've given you the benefit of the doubt for months, Doctor, but not any more! I won't have bigots on my ship, least of all among my senior officers."

"Bigots? Me?" The blue chips flashed as the Doctor jumped to his own feet. "What's that supposed to mean, Captain?"

Kirk turned, his face flushed with anger. "Spock, Doctor... Commander Spock! That's who I'm talking about." He tossed the tape he held onto the desk. "And that... crap... there!"

"I said what I thought," McCoy said defensively.

"Exactly!" Kirk spat the word, then leaned across the desk, his hands resting on the cluttered top. "You've never given him a chance, have you? Christ, I thought it was just talk with you, nothing really behind it all, just good-natured bantering, jokes... But it isn't, is it, McCoy? You're xenophobic, aren't you?"

"I'm WHAT? You've gotta be kidding!" McCoy turned away.

"Don't you turn from me, Doctor. I'm the Captain here."

"Then act like one."

"You're not talking to him now, McCoy," Kirk rasped. "He is First Officer and Science Officer..."

"So?"

"So, I've left him in command of the Enterprise more times than I can count, and God knows how many times Chris Pike left him in charge before my time. He could have been Captain, Doctor... did you know that? They offered it to him before me, and he turned it down."

The Doctor looked uncomfortable for the first time.

"Did you know that? Did you?" demanded Kirk.

The dark head shook slightly.

"No, of course you didn't, and he wouldn't tell you when you were shooting your mouth off down on Taurus II - not Spock."

"I don't think I was entirely wrong," McCoy said quietly.

"No? Let me refresh your memory, Doctor." Kirk sat down suddenly, his hands still resting on the desk top, and waited as McCoy slowly sat once more, then he began to recount all that the Doctor had said on the planet. As he spoke McCoy began to fidget until Kirk's voice finally tailed off.

McCoy coughed and began to squirm. "Hell, Jim, hearing it cold like that... Well, I didn't mean it quite like that."

"No?" Kirk couldn't hide the sarcasm.

"NO," the Doctor said emphatically. "But he's so damn unemotional."

"He's a Vulcan, Bones." Kirk used his nickname for the first time since he'd entered his quarters.

"He is also half Human, Jim," McCoy retorted quietly, "and it isn't natural to be like that. He's got to learn to give way to his Human side occasionally, at least if he's going to survive."

"There are other ways of getting your point across without undermining his authority, Bones."

"Undermine? Me? I didn't!"

"No?" He looked quizzically at his friend. "I'd hardly call your words supportive, would you?"

"Well..." The doctor's mouth twitched. "Maybe not supportive, exactly, but he's so damn sure of himself."

"No." Kirk shook his head. "You couldn't be more wrong, Bones. Hell, it's taken me enough time even to begin to know and understand him. When I first met him, I admit, I thought much the same way as you, 'What a cold bastard I've got here', and it wasn't till Gary..." He hesitated - it still hurt to talk about it. "... Till Gary's death, and he actually came right out and admitted he could feel; just the same as us... that was when I began to take time out to look behind the facade..." Kirk met the blue eyes gravely. "Don't you think it's about time you did, Doctor?"

"You really like him, don't you, Jim?"

The fair head nodded. "Yeah, guess I do... and what are you going to make of that?" he grinned.

McCoy smiled slowly. "Nothing, except, I've always admired your ability to weigh people up, Jim... so I guess I'll be reviewing my opinion of our First Officer," he replied.

"Good." Kirk let the relief he felt register on his face.

"Mind you," McCoy chuckled softly, "I'm not saying I'll change my mind overnight, Captain - but I will try."

"Just give him a chance, Bones - you might be surprised."

An hour later the door closed behind his friend and Kirk cleared the glasses from his desk. McCoy was a good friend, and so was the Vulcan, although in a totally different way. Oh, he knew the old saying, 'two's company, three's a crowd', only he didn't want it that way. They could be close, a real triad, if only his two so very different and dear friends would get to know and understand each other. Perhaps one day... he sighed... but till that day dawned he'd have to do that one thing that he knew now was necessary. He had been meaning to take care of it for some time, but in the light of today's events, it could not be put off any longer.

He turned to the computer, activated the visi-screen, slipped a tape into the slot, and began to record...

"Spock, Bones. Since you are playing this tape, we will assume that I am dead, the tactical situation is critical, and the two of you are locked in mortal combat. It means also, Spock..."

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#### THERE COMES A TIME TO SHARE \*

Deep in the darkest corner, chill waters  
 Ripple loneliness through my isolation,  
 Touching all that I am, unseen and unheard.  
 That I feel, that I need, these have no interest,  
 Are of no consequence but to myself,  
 A hidden longing.  
 I can see in your eyes a light,  
 Offering friendship, bright with the hope of acceptance,  
 But painful memories have made me wary.  
 My Humanity, gentle and undisciplined,  
 Condemns me to be more, not less, than pure blood Vulcan.  
 A trust, not easily divulged, it yearns to greet you,  
 But turns to cold within my Vulcan eyes.

Each day there is a horror,  
 A shuddering certainty of imminent dishonour  
 As every breath in your presence weakens control.  
 Not since childhood days and a mother's knowing  
 Have I been so comforted by someone's caring,  
 Felt discipline waver in a wish to respond.  
 Giver of pain, James Kirk, don't make me need you.  
 Such shame I suffer because of you,  
 Bringing a pleasure that consumes all pride.  
 You will achieve my complete destruction..  
 Laugh now, it is amusing, is it not,  
 The stoic Vulcan full of tears?  
 In all my disgrace I am revealed,  
 The wells of feeling plain to see.

Gillian Catchpole

\*Inspired by "The Beginning and the End", by Simone Mason

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Scotty's Law: If anything is going to go wrong with the engines, it'll happen the moment the Captain orders warp 10.

\*\*\*\*\*

TWO SIDES OF PARADISE by Sheryl Peterson

It is empty!  
 I stop, stunned,  
 Looking around the silent bridge.  
 Emptiness such as I have never known,  
 Not here!  
 The silence beats at me.  
 The bright, winking lights  
 And the metallic twittering  
 Of your myriad heartbeats  
 Seem desperate, almost,  
 To attract my attention,  
 Proclaiming loneliness.  
 No hands answer their call  
 Where once there were so many -  
 No voices answer my call  
 Where once I was law.  
 We are alone,  
 You and I, Enterprise,  
 Marooned  
 In our home element of space.  
 While below is,  
 Omicron Ceti Three  
 Hangs plump and bright  
 Like the apple  
 That betrayed first Eve,  
 Then Adam,  
 And lost them Paradise.  
 It has tempted my crew away.  
 Impossibly -  
 It has even stolen Spock!  
 I feel as if my right arm  
 Has been torn from my body.  
 The bond that held us  
 Across light-years and galaxies  
 Severed by the bright blade  
 Of a girl's eyes!  
 He is happy -  
 His laughter sings  
 In the sunlit forest.  
 For perhaps the first time  
 He knows what happiness is.  
 He has found Paradise  
 And offers to share it with me -  
 As do they all.  
 But you are my Paradise,  
 You - Enterprise - my only love.  
 Either way I turn now  
 I must lose irrevocably.  
 I bow my head -  
 The silence of that once-loved bridge  
 Beating at my heart.

And the spore plant before me,  
 Unnoticed, takes aim.

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Kevin Riley: Doctor, I keep talking to myself.

McCoy: No wonder you look bored.

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THE MELAKRON AFFAIR by Ann PreeceCaptain's Log, Stardate 7524.3

"The Enterprise is currently orbiting Tetron and its sister planet Melakron. Comparative newcomers to the Federation - they have been members for a mere six months - the twin planets have proved a valuable addition to the Federation, owing to their rich supplies of natural mineral resources.

"Colonies of Federation personnel have been established on both planets, and for the last three days we have been engaged in carrying out routine checks on the colonists, and delivering much-needed equipment and medical supplies.

"Owing to the delicate nature of some of the equipment, and following the advice of Chief Medical Officer McCoy, we are using the shuttlecraft Columbus, instead of our usual method of transportation.

"Having successfully completed our mission on Tetron, we are now on course for Melakron. So far, the survey has passed without incident."

Kirk switched off the tape. Beside him, Spock was busily engaged in monitoring instruments and taking sensor readings. Everything was under control, so he could afford to relax for a moment. He swivelled his chair round to face McCoy, his lips beginning to curve into a half-smile.

"Was that strictly true?" he asked

"Was what true?" McCoy assumed an innocent expression.

"All that about 'delicate equipment'."

McCoy's reply was quick. "You've seen the equipment, Jim - you know yourself how 'delicate' it is."

"Hmm." Kirk was not entirely convinced. "Are you sure?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I know you too well, Bones. I also know how much you dislike the transporter. Goodness knows, you've complained enough in the past about having your molecules scrambled. I just thought..."

"We-el, Jim," McCoy drawled, as he leaned back in his seat and stretched. "You've got to admit that this is a more civilised way to travel. And," he added, "with you as pilot, and Spock here as navigator, what could possibly go wrong?"

At that last remark Spock had turned, a look of total amazement on the usually serious features.

"Why, Doctor, I do believe you have just paid me a compliment."

Kirk couldn't help grinning as a look of complete horror crossed McCoy's face.

"Good Lord - so I have. I must be sickening for something..." He paused, detecting a muffled sound from behind him, and turned in time to see Uhura vainly struggling to control the laughter bubbling up inside her.

"Anything wrong, Lieutenant?" McCoy asked, regarding her with twinkling blue eyes.

With a supreme effort Uhura attempted to compose her features into an expression she hoped befitted her position as the Enterprise's chief Communications Officer.

"No, Doctor - everything's fine," she replied, demurely lowering her eyes to hide the amusement which danced within them.

McCoy grinned back, not believing a word of it.

The lightness of the moment lasted a few seconds until -

"Captain!"

There was no disguising the urgency in Spock's voice.

All bantering, all pretence at relaxation vanished as Kirk turned to his First Officer.

"What is it, Spock?"

The Vulcan pointed to the readings which had been occupying his attention for the last few minutes. "Sensors indicate an ion storm - and we are directly in its path."

"Can we make planet-fall before it hits us?"

Spock nodded. "I believe so, Captain. Our ETA at Melakron is 10.4 minutes, and although the situation is serious, there is no immediate danger."

Turning to face the others, Kirk asked, "Everyone strapped in?" There were nods of assent. "Good. We may be in for a bumpy ride, so hold on tight. Ready, Spock?"

"Affirmative."

"Then here goes."

Behind him, McCoy leaned over to pat Uhura's arm, trying to reassure her with one of his warm smiles. "Don't worry - we'll be okay."

Grateful for his concern, Uhura returned the doctor's smile as she answered, "I know. What can possibly go wrong when the Captain and Mr. Spock are running things."

"That's the spirit. We'll be out of this in no time."

Even as he spoke, the small craft lurched sideways, buffeted by the approaching storm, and in the pilot's seat Kirk struggled to keep the Columbus on course. Ten minutes later, thanks to his skill and Spock's expert guidance, they were out of the storm, and the shuttlecraft had arrived safely on Melakron, much to the relief of the people aboard her.

"Well, we made it." Kirk leaned back in his chair and surveyed his small crew, which comprised three security guards in addition to the four senior officers, before glancing at Spock. "Any chance of contacting the Enterprise?"

Spock shook his head. "Not at present, Captain. Although it has receded, the storm continues to affect our communications system." To prove his point he turned to the communications console and threw a switch. They were immediately assailed by a violent burst of static - nothing could penetrate such interference.

Raising his hands to his ears in a vain attempt to shut out the offending noise, Kirk shouted, "Okay, Spock - you've made your point. Switch it off... please."

Unperturbed, Spock complied with the request.

"That's better. For a moment I could hardly hear myself think. Well, now that we're here, shall we get on with the job at hand? After all, that is why we're here, isn't it?"

Unstrapping himself from his seat, McCoy collected his medi-kit - he wouldn't dream of going anywhere without it - and nodding towards the remainder of the equipment said, "I'll collect the remainder of this later, once we've contacted the colonists and found out what they need. It should be all right here for the time being."

"Has everyone else got all they need?" Kirk asked. "Spock? Uhura?" They nodded. "Good. Then let's go - I don't know about anyone else, but I'll be glad to stretch my legs after being cooped up in here..." Grinning, he glanced

at Spock, noting the puzzlement in his First Officer's eyes. "It's okay, Spock - it's just a saying; I don't mean it literally!"

Kirk moved to open the door, and one by one they stepped down from the shuttlecraft into the cool, inviting air of Melakron.

"Oh... isn't it beautiful!" Uhura exclaimed, her eyes alight with excitement and appreciation as she surveyed their surroundings.

The Columbus had come to rest on the outskirts of a wooded glade. Beneath their feet lush green grass formed a soft welcoming carpet, and overhead the clear sky was blue - a beautiful, dazzling blue without a cloud to mar its surface. A gentle breeze ruffled the branches of the trees, dappled gold by the rays from Melakron's sun, and already alive with the unmistakable sound of birdsong.

Uhura wandered over towards the edge of the clearing, her attention caught by the blaze of colour provided by the planet's abundant flora. There was a rapt expression on her face, the dreamy, far-away look in her dark eyes - it wasn't often that she had the chance to take part in planet surveys of this nature, and she was determined to enjoy every minute of it, for much as she enjoyed her work, it made a pleasant change to leave the Enterprise once in a while.

Totally absorbed in her surroundings, she failed to hear Kirk's quiet approach from behind. He had been regarding his Communications Officer steadily for some minutes before intruding on her obvious enjoyment.

"Penny for them, Uhura," he said, understanding a little of what she was thinking and experiencing.

Uhura started as the sound of Kirk's voice broke in on her thoughts. "Oh - Captain... I'm sorry. I didn't hear you." She smiled at him, and indicated the flowers which had attracted her attention. "I was admiring the blooms - they're so pretty."

"They are," Kirk agreed, responding to Uhura's smile with a warm smile of his own. "You seemed so engrossed I was almost reluctant to disturb you, but..."

Immediately, Uhura understood the unspoken statement. "I know - don't tell me: duty comes first," she replied, laughing; but as she followed the Captain she couldn't help adding, somewhat wistfully, "But it is so peaceful here..." Ah well - perhaps later...

Pulling herself together, she hurried to catch up with her three senior officers, who had started to move away in the opposite direction, almost running to match her steps to their longer strides.

"Hey - wait for me!" she exclaimed.

McCoy turned, grinning at her over his shoulder. "Come on, slow-coach," he teased. "You don't want to be left behind, do you?" He chuckled as Uhura threw him a disdainful look.

A steady pace brought the Enterprise contingent to the outskirts of the colonists' settlement in a matter of minutes. The compound comprised a number of wooden dwellings, with regulation-issue standard survival tents of varying sizes scattered at intervals. It was from one of the latter that a tall, distinguished looking man in his mid-to-late thirties emerged and began walking towards them, his hands extended in a gesture of welcome.

"Captain Kirk! I can't begin to tell you how pleased I am to see you and your party."

"Dr. Llewelyn, I presume?" Kirk asked.

The doctor nodded. "Indeed."

"May I introduce my First Officer, Mr. Spock; my Chief Medical Officer, Dr. McCoy; and Lieutenant Uhura, Chief Communications Officer."

Llewelyn greeted the newcomers cordially. "I am delighted to make your acquaintance, gentlemen - Ms. Uhura. Now, if you would care to come this way..."

Although the doctor's face was creased with smiles, Kirk couldn't help but notice the almost hidden anxiety contained in the grey eyes, which darted furtively from side to side as Llewelyn led them into the compound. The doctor's attitude puzzled Kirk. Always susceptible to atmosphere, the Captain was aware that something was wrong, although he couldn't quite explain it. For some inexplicable reason he felt uneasy. Llewelyn was almost too pleased to see them - relieved, in actual fact. He glanced at Spock and McCoy, unsurprised to note that they, too, were thinking along similar lines.

Leaving the security personnel outside, Llewelyn ushered the four officers - somewhat hurriedly - into one of the largest tents, and gestured them to waiting seats.

"As you can see, Captain, our surroundings are somewhat primitive, but our supplies are adequate and sufficient to our needs. May I offer you some refreshment?"

Kirk declined the offer as graciously as possible, deciding that it would be better for all concerned if the doctor would come straight to the point, instead of 'beating about the bush'. "Doctor... what exactly is wrong here?"

"Wrong, Captain? What makes you suspect that there is anything wrong?" Llewelyn asked, with a futile attempt at innocence.

"Your attitude, Doctor. You seem... uneasy... almost edgy, in fact. And I'm not the only one who has noticed; my fellow officers are also aware of this ... underlying tension. The fact that you seemed more than relieved to see us obviously proves that all is not as it should be. Why not tell us about it?" Kirk coaxed. "Perhaps we can help."

"I can see you are a most perceptive man, Captain," Llewelyn remarked, the ghost of a smile appearing on the handsome, yet troubled, face.

"Not much escapes my notice, Doctor," Kirk replied, returning the smile, before his expression sobered. "Now, what can we do to help? As far as we were concerned, this was to be a purely routine mission, and we were totally unaware that you were experiencing...difficulties of any kind."

Llewelyn remained silent for several moments, apparently lost in thought, before taking a deep breath and beginning his story.

"I and my colleagues arrived on Melakron a matter of weeks after the planet had joined the Federation. We settled in quickly, easily adapting ourselves to our changed life-style, and - at first - we found the natives to be extremely cooperative - they were quite friendly, willing to help, and responded well to our advances of friendship."

Llewelyn hesitated for a moment, obviously re-living the memories of those early weeks. "However, as time passed we began to notice a subtle change in the Melakrons' attitude, particularly after the death of their leader. It had been very obvious to us, almost from the beginning, that the old man was the guiding force behind his people, and his two sons, Talish and Valmoon. Now, with that influence having been removed, the two sons - who always seemed to be on opposing sides - began their bitter struggle for power and control, as in the case of Valmoon, and leadership by fair means, as Talish favoured. It was all too apparent that even on this seemingly peaceful world, the struggle for good and evil was very much in evidence, the forces of good forever at war with the forces of evil.

"Talish was the son who most closely resembled his father. It was perfectly clear that he was aware of the benefits which an alliance with the Federation would undoubtedly bring to his people, and he wanted to co-operate with us. Valmoon, on the other hand, made it quite clear that he wished to be rid of us, the 'Outsiders', as he called us. I believe he sees our presence here as a threat to his newly found independence. From what has been happening recently, we're very much afraid that Valmoon may be succeeding in his plan to drive us out. As is often the case, Captain, evil is proving to be the stronger of the

two, and it is Valmoon who is taking control, possibly by force, although that is merely supposition on our part, of course. Unfortunately, we have no proof; but it's almost as though he possesses some kind of power which he can bend to his will."

As Llewelyn concluded his narrative McCoy, who had been quiet for some time, asked the question that was on everyone's lips. "Do you have any idea of the form this power takes?"

"No, Dr. McCoy, unfortunately I don't. It could be anything from a strong telepathic ability to hypnotism. In fact, if I wasn't allowing myself to be too fanciful, Valmoon reminds me of the devil worshippers of Earth's history. I'm sure you all remember the old stories and legends - the tales of witches, black magic, the occult, all that sort of thing. As a boy, I used to find them fascinating."

At the mention of black magic a gasp had escaped from Uhura's lips, and involuntarily she shivered. She could remember, all too clearly, the stories of voodoo and black magic that her grandmother had told her when she was little more than a child. Indeed, she had even participated in some of the more harmless rituals, especially during the religious feasts and gatherings. But the darker side of the occult had always frightened her, and now the memories came flooding back to haunt her. She glanced towards Kirk, her eyes wide with fear.

Kirk saw the look, and gave her a reassuring smile. //Don't worry,// his eyes seemed to say. //We'll find a 'logical' explanation for all of this, you'll see.//

Uhura sat back, her fears momentarily forgotten, as Llewelyn resumed his story.

"As time passed, the unease grew. We began to feel threatened, and the natives, especially the followers of Valmoon, were becoming increasingly hostile. Then there was Angharad..." Llewelyn's voice faltered for a moment, before he added, "She was our biologist. She disappeared... three nights ago." He fell silent, obviously too upset to continue, the mention of Angharad's name having evoked painful memories.

"You say she disappeared... Did you try to find her?" Kirk asked gently.

The steel-grey eyes blazed with anger. "Of course we tried to find her, Captain - what do you take me for?" But the outburst of anger was over in seconds. "I'm sorry... I don't know what came over me... I shouldn't have snapped at you like that..."

"It's all right, Doctor - I think I understand," Kirk responded soothingly.

There was the merest hesitation before Llewelyn continued, haltingly, "You see, Captain - Angharad and I are engaged. We are to be married when we return to Earth. Now she has disappeared... When we tried to locate her, we were met with a wall of silence and non-cooperation. As the unease grew, we considered contacting our sister base on Tetron and asking for their assistance."

"Why didn't you, Doctor?" Spock asked.

"The reason is simple, Mr. Spock - someone had tampered with our communications system."

"But surely the colonists on Tetron would have investigated when you failed to make contact?" Kirk queried.

"Not really, Captain. We have been plagued, of late, by a number of ion storms, so our colleagues would attribute our silence to that." He paused before adding thoughtfully, "You offered us your help, Captain. Does that offer still stand?"

"Of course, Doctor. My officers and I will do everything in our power to help you and your colleagues - you can count on that."

An expression of total relief crossed Llewelyn's features at Kirk's



declaration of assistance. They had waited so long for help that now, with the arrival of the Enterprise officers, perhaps everything would be all right... perhaps their troubles would soon be over... The Doctor sincerely hoped so.

Night came swiftly and silently to Melakron. The glorious brightness of the day had rapidly been replaced by an almost impenetrable darkness by the time Llewelyn had acquainted his guests with all the relevant facts.

"Well, I think that just about covers everything," he remarked, glancing round the assembled group. "Does anyone have anything further they wish to ask? Captain?"

Kirk directed his gaze towards his senior officers, raising a questioning eyebrow, but as no comments were forthcoming, he replied, "I don't think so, Doctor; anything else can wait until morning. There's very little we can do at the moment."

"Agreed. Having waited this long for help, I don't imagine a few more hours will make a great deal of difference. I suggest we all try and get some rest." Llewelyn stood. "If you would permit me to show you to your quarters...?"

He led the way outside, indicating the sleeping quarters on the far side of the settlement. "Ms. Uhura, I hope you don't mind, but I've given you Angharad's quarters. I thought..." He fell silent, a little uncertain as to what to say next.

"That will be fine, Doctor," Uhura interrupted hurriedly, trying to inject a touch of lightness into her voice. Inwardly, however, she suppressed a shudder, and then gave herself a mental shake; she was not going to allow her superstitious fancies to get the better of her. With a forced attempt at brightness she bade her colleagues goodnight, and with a determined step headed towards the tent indicated.

As the four men began to walk across to the quarters assigned to Kirk and Spock, McCoy broke the silence.

"Dr. Llewelyn, I was wondering if you could spare me a little of your time? There are certain topics I'd like to discuss with you, and I don't often have the opportunity to exchange ideas with another doctor... that is, if you don't mind. Of course, I'll understand if you're too busy."

"Not at all, Dr. McCoy - that would be most pleasant... If you will excuse us, gentlemen? I'll wish you goodnight."

"Of course," Kirk replied. "Goodnight, Bones - try not to keep the Doctor up talking all night. Goodnight, Dr. Llewelyn."

McCoy chuckled. "I won't, Jim. See you in the morning. 'Night, Spock."

The two figures moved away, talking quietly together, and in seconds were swallowed up by the darkness.

"It looks as though Bones has found himself a kindred spirit," Kirk remarked with a quiet laugh. "Despite his assurances to the contrary, they'll probably be talking 'shop' until well into the night - if I know Leonard McCoy."

"Indeed, Captain."

They reached their quarters, and Kirk paused on the threshold. "Do you feel tired, Spock?"

"Not really."

"Neither do I. I think I'll sit outside for a while - care to join me? I'd appreciate the company."

Kirk sat down, drawing his knees up to his chest, and was not surprised when, seconds later, Spock joined him, carefully lowering his long frame to the ground, and stretched out beside him.

They were quiet for a long time, enjoying the companionable silence which flowed easily between them. Their thoughts were so in tune with each other that on many occasions words were often unnecessary; this was the case now.

Everything was still; nothing moved or made a sound to mar the peacefulness of the moment.

Kirk allowed a contented sigh to escape his lips, and stretched, clasping his hands behind his head. He murmured softly, almost to himself, "It's so peaceful here. I could soon become accustomed to this kind of life; no responsibilities; no command decisions; no worries; no..."

"That is something I should very much like to see. The experience might prove to be most... interesting," a quiet voice interrupted, with just a trace of amusement in the mellow tone.

Kirk turned to see Spock regarding him steadily, his face as expressionless as usual, but was there just the slightest hint of a twinkle in the depths of the dark eyes which only Kirk could read? He believed so.

Keeping his tone light, and continuing the teasing mood, Kirk replied, "I think you'd better explain that last remark, Mister."

"Somehow, Jim, I cannot see you as a man of idleness. My friend... you would be bored within a week." There was open amusement in Spock's eyes now.

Kirk responded with a sheepish grin. "Yeah, I guess you're right. You know me too well."

Spock acknowledged the truth of that remark with a slight inclination of his head.

With the smile still on his lips, Kirk turned away, lifting his face to the night sky, his expressive eyes automatically drawn to the stars.

Moments before, Melakron's moon had appeared at last, bathing the surrounding area with its soft, silvery light, throwing ghostly shadows on the silently watching trees. Far above them, the stars twinkled like thousands of diamonds against the ebony backcloth; and somewhere, amongst those tiny pin-pricks of light, his own jewel lay: the Enterprise, perhaps the brightest diamond of them all. His ship. He felt the old familiar surge of pride each time he thought of her - the finest Starship in Starfleet.

As though reading his thoughts, a quiet voice said softly, "The stars still hold a certain fascination for you, don't they, Jim?"

Kirk nodded. "Their appeal is as great now as it was all those years ago when I realised that my destiny lay out there. There are times, even now, when I can't quite believe that all my dreams have come true; all - and more - of my wishes have been fulfilled."

"I, too, understand that... feeling. When I went against my father's wishes and chose to pursue a career in Starfleet instead of following his advice and accepting the position offered to me at the Science Academy, he felt I was making a grave mistake - that my decision was wrong."

"And was it?"

"Jim... I think that is one question you can answer for yourself." The dark eyes regarded him steadily, a wealth of expression in their fathomless depths: they conveyed an unspoken message - and one that Kirk could read clearly.

The Vulcan paused before continuing slowly, thoughtfully. "Half Vulcan, half Human; I never felt as though I could truly belong anywhere. At home I was always regarded as less than Vulcan; among Humans, I was looked on as an alien - an outsider. You changed all that, Jim - you... and the Enterprise. At last I have found a place where I am accepted for myself, and for the first time in my life I believe I can honestly say that I have found a home."

"Would you say you were happy?" Kirk asked softly, somewhat awed that his quiet, controlled friend had revealed so much of his inner self.

"Yes, Jim - happy... and content."

Kirk gave a wistful sigh. "If only it could always be like this. No changes; no dangers to face; the dreadful uncertainties each time..." He fell silent, choking back the words before they could be spoken. The hazel eyes held a pensive expression. "Who can tell what the future holds for us?" he whispered.

In an attempt to lighten the highly emotional atmosphere Spock remarked, with a rare touch of humour, "That is one question which I am afraid I cannot answer, Jim. We shall have to wait and see, and not 'cross our bridges before we come to them', I believe is the appropriate saying; or, as the good Doctor would undoubtedly remark - I am a Science Officer, not a clairvoyant!"

Kirk almost choked at the sound of the all-too-familiar statement issuing from the Vulcan's lips. If only Bones could have heard that last remark!

Enjoying Kirk's amusement at the light bantering - at least he had succeeded in dispelling his Captain's gloomy thoughts on the future - Spock permitted the ghost of a smile to cross his features.

But the light mood was not to last. As Kirk's laughter died away, the peace of the evening was rudely shattered by a high-pitched scream - then there was silence.

For a few stunned seconds neither man could move; they merely stared at each other in complete puzzlement. Then awareness returned - Uhura! The scream had issued from the Communications Officer's quarters.

As one, they rose to their feet and desperately hurried to the opposite side of the compound. As they ran Kirk's thoughts were in a turmoil, and as usual he blamed himself for what might have happened to Uhura. With all that had occurred on Melakron over the past few weeks, he rebuked himself for having allowed her to go off on her own, for he had sensed that she was afraid, even although she had tried her best to conceal her fear. He should have insisted on a watch being maintained! Yet everything had seemed so peaceful... His heart in his mouth, Kirk knew that if anything happened to Uhura he would never forgive himself.

The high-pitched scream had alerted the rest of the colonists, and as Kirk and Spock arrived at Uhura's quarters they were met by a worried McCoy, and an even more agitated Llewelyn.

"What happened?" McCoy questioned. "We heard a scream, and..."

"I don't know, Bones. You're as wise as we are," Kirk snapped, his worry making him sound more abrupt than he had intended. Pushing past the doctor, who was too taken aback at Kirk's attitude to even begin to think of a suitable reply, he entered the now-deserted quarters, his expression grim as he took in the crudely-slit rent at the back of the tent, and the general disorder which signified that there had been a struggle. Of the Bantu Communications Officer there was no sign.

Emerging to join the others, Kirk remarked somewhat unnecessarily, "She's gone!"

"Oh no! This is the second time... first Angharad... now..."

Kirk turned to confront the speaker. His puzzled gaze alighted on a young woman in her late twenties, who was standing on the fringe of the group.

"It's Valmoon! He's taken them!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide with fear. "What's going to happen to us?" Sobbing, she raised her tear-streaked face to the young man at her side who was attempting to console her - without much success.

"It's okay, Vicky. We'll find them... you'll see," he soothed, his troubled eyes seeking and holding Kirk's gaze, silently pleading. The Captain gave an almost imperceptible nod of reassurance before springing into action.

"Everyone spread out. Try and cover as much of the area as possible..." he began, before Llewelyn interrupted him.

"Captain - there is nothing you can do tonight. Why not wait until morning before..."

Angrily Kirk turned on the doctor. "Did I hear you correctly, Doctor? Are you seriously suggesting that we leave Uhura out there, without even so much as attempting to find her? God knows what danger she might be in!"

"Believe me, Captain, I do understand how you feel," Llewelyn replied quietly, and the expression in the grey eyes seemed to say, I, too, have already suffered a similar loss. He continued, "But how do you intend to search in such darkness?"

As though to prove his point, Melakron's moon chose that exact moment to vanish behind a cloud, plunging the world below into almost total darkness.

There was silence for a long moment while Kirk considered the logic of Llewelyn's statement. He felt a gentle pressure on his arm, and turned to meet Spock's steady gaze.

"Jim - the doctor is correct. Even I would have great difficulty in seeing clearly in such darkness," the Vulcan said softly.

Acknowledging defeat, at least for the present, Kirk allowed his shoulders to slump just a little as he answered, "Yeah - I guess you're right. There's very little we can do tonight." He turned to Llewelyn. "I'm sorry, Doctor - I shouldn't have snapped at you like that."

Llewelyn responded with a sympathetic smile. "Forget it, Captain. I know how you must be feeling."

With one last, worried glance at Uhura's deserted quarters, Kirk remarked, "If we're going to be alert for our search in the morning, I think we'd better try and get some rest. Okay?"

Following his suggestion, the colonists began to drift away, and Kirk and Spock followed them in silence, lost in thought. Reaching their quarters they settled to sleep but, consumed with worry, Kirk found rest very elusive that night.

After tossing and turning restlessly throughout the night hours - although he had tried to control his movements so as not to disturb the sleeping Vulcan - Kirk eventually fell into a fitful doze a few hours before dawn. He was awakened by the sound of Spock's quiet movements as he busied himself around their quarters, and when he opened his eyes, thin grey light streamed in through the open doorway.

Glancing over his shoulder, Spock saw that his friend was awake. "Good morning, Captain."

He was answered by a tired grunt as Kirk made a valiant effort to drag himself to full awareness. As remembrance of the previous evening's happenings flooded his senses, he became instantly alert; however.

After a hurried breakfast, Kirk organised the search parties into groups of two and three, the colonists having come to assist the Enterprise officers on what was to prove a fruitless search for the missing Lieutenant.

A group of natives had collected on the outer fringe of the compound, and were watching the outworlders with a certain amount of curiosity. Impulsively, Kirk moved over to question them. There was just a chance, albeit a small one, that someone might have seen what had happened to Uhura. But it was a complete waste of time. All his questions were met with blank stares, and the same wall of silence. Indeed, Kirk was beginning to wonder if the Melakrons could speak, so silent were they. Shrugging his shoulders in defeat, he re-joined Spock, and the two men followed their colleagues from the settlement.

For several hours they searched thoroughly and systematically, scouring the surrounding areas in vain for some sign of Uhura and her captors. While they continued to search, Kirk was unable to shrug off the uncomfortable feeling that they were being watched, and several times he received the distinct impression that there were many pairs of eyes boring into the back of his head. The thought made him shiver; but whenever he turned, the undergrowth behind them remained deceptively still and quiet. Perhaps the whispering he thought he had heard was only the wind in the trees...

"Captain?"

He glanced round to see Spock regarding him with a certain amount of puzzlement. He gave the Vulcan a slight smile.

"It's nothing, Spock," he reassured. "I guess I'm allowing this place to get to me. Either that, or my imagination is becoming too fanciful. But I would have sworn that, for a moment at least, we were being watched." As Spock nodded he added, "You sensed it, too?"

"Yes - but as we appear to be alone, it would seem that we are both mistaken."

Kirk pondered that for a moment. "No... No, I don't think so. The impressions I received were too strong. It's far more likely to have been the natives," he continued, thinking aloud. "I know they haven't done anything to impede our efforts, but they haven't gone out of their way to be particularly helpful, either." He sighed. "Come on, let's go and find the others. Perhaps they've had more luck..."

"Perhaps." Spock did not give voice to the thought that was in both their minds; it seemed highly unlikely that any of the others would have been more successful than they.

Slowly, and in silence, they retraced their steps and returned to the compound.

\* \* \*

Uhura regained consciousness in a cold, damp cave, deep underground, completely disoriented and unable to tell where she was or how long she had been unconscious. She lay perfectly still for several minutes, trying to collect her thoughts, and forced herself to remember the events which had led up to her being incarcerated in this prison. As the memories returned she shuddered, and winced as the movement caused a stab of pain to shoot through the back of her head. She remembered it all so clearly now: the sound of tearing canvas; the sudden - and frightening - appearance of her captors; her desperate struggle against superior strength which not even her command training had prepared her for; and finally - oblivion.

Cautiously, she tried to move, stretching painfully cramped muscles, and eased herself into a more comfortable position. Very slowly, and with deliberate care, she opened her eyes, only to snap them shut almost immediately as the walls of the cave spun alarmingly before her.

//Take it easy, Uhura,// she chided herself. //Try not to do too much too soon. Now - one thing at a time.//

Tentatively, she tried opening her eyes again, and breathed a sigh of relief as her surroundings remained stable. //So far, so good,// she thought.

Curiously, she glanced round her prison. The cave was long and low, the scant torchlight throwing flickering shadows on the too-moist walls. Numberless passageways stretched as far as the eye could see, all of which seemed to culminate in this central cavern. At this discovery, Uhura felt her heart sink, and for a brief instant she experienced an unfamiliar sense of defeat as she realised that escape appeared virtually impossible, for without a guide she knew she would be hopelessly lost within moments.

However, the Chief Communications Officer of the Enterprise was not one to

give in so easily; nor was she the type of person to calmly sit back and accept what the fates had decreed for her without some show of resistance. With this in mind, she rose to her feet - somewhat unsteadily, it must be admitted, as her legs almost gave way from under her - and stood for a few seconds trying to decide which of the many passages she should choose. Speed was of the essence now, for she had been left alone for too long - there was no knowing when her captors would return, and when they did... Grimly, Uhura pushed such a harrowing thought to the back of her mind; she had enough to worry about without dwelling on such an unpleasant matter.

Her decision made, she was about to take her first wary steps on the path which she hoped would lead to freedom, when her keen hearing detected a low moan which appeared to issue from somewhere over to her left, and slightly behind her present position.

For a moment she hesitated, her heart racing, wondering who or what it was, for until now she had thought that she was very much on her own. Pulling herself together, and rebuking herself for her momentary pang of unease, she turned sharply in the direction of the sound.

Peering ahead into the gloom, she noticed a small cleft in the wall of the cave, barely wide enough to allow a human to pass through, and almost - but not quite - undetectable. Summoning her courage, Uhura took several cautious steps towards the opening and squeezed through, only to find herself in yet another, smaller, chamber. But this was only the first of her surprises, however, for as her eyes became accustomed to the dimness, she found herself staring at the huddled figure of the missing biologist from the compound.

With extreme care Uhura inched towards the girl who sat leaning heavily against the rock wall for support, the picture of total misery, her head slumped forward, her eyes closed. So as not to startle her companion, Uhura knelt at the side of the girl and softly whispered, "Angharad?", stumbling slightly as she attempted to pronounce the unfamiliar Welsh name. However, although the latter stirred restlessly, she made no other response, and seemed to be unaware of Uhura's presence.

"Oh, Lord - what a mess!" Uhura exclaimed aloud, sitting back on her heels to consider her present situation. "How on earth am I going to get you away from here?" She glanced worriedly at the unmoving figure. "I can't leave without you, and yet..."

"There is no escape for you, Dark One!" The loud voice broke in on her musings, the sound seeming to reverberate around the small chamber, and Uhura felt a momentary stab of fear. Quickly controlling it, she turned slowly to meet the intruder, although instinct told her who it would be...

Valmoon! Uhura had never seen the Chief's second son, but she had heard enough from Llewelyn to recognise him now.

Warily, Uhura scrambled to her feet - she felt less vulnerable in a standing position - and stepped back a pace. Valmoon advanced towards her, his eyes glinting evilly, a cruel sneer seeming to twist his mouth into a grimace.

"No, my pretty one, you won't be going anywhere - I have other plans for you." So saying, he lunged towards his helpless victim, but was unprepared for Uhura's quick movement; spinning on her heel, she successfully dodged the outstretched arms and dashed towards the opening in the rock face. Unfortunately, in her haste to escape she misjudged its position, and slammed heavily into the wall, temporarily stunning herself.

She sensed, rather than saw, Valmoon approaching her - heard the evil laugh as he bent to drag her painfully to her feet.

"I told you there was no escape, and it was very foolish of you to attempt it. You might have hurt yourself, and I have no wish to see you harmed - at least, not yet." The alien eyes sought - and held - her frightened gaze.

"Wha - what do you mean?" Uhura stammered, fighting to tear her eyes away

from Valmoon's face. She tried to move away from him, but felt herself transfixed, her legs refusing to obey the commands of her brain. And all the time those alien eyes continued to hold her within their power.

Power? What was it Llewelyn had said about Valmoon's power? She struggled to recall the doctor's words. 'It could be anything from a strong telepathic ability to hypnotism.' Yes, she remembered it now. Hypnotism? Was that what he was trying to do? Hypnotise her so that she could be controlled at will - would be totally within his power?

"No!" she cried as recognition dawned. "I won't let you control me!" Gathering her remaining strength she threw herself at Valmoon, all the while knowing that she didn't stand a chance against his superior strength.

Laughing, Valmoon easily restrained Uhura's flailing arms and pinned them effortlessly behind her back. "So - I have found myself a fighter. That is good - very good. Aventura will be pleased."

"Who the hell is Aventura?" Uhura demanded, still engaged in her futile struggle.

"That need not concern you - at present."

"Oh? And when do I get to meet this...Aventura?" The trace of sarcasm in the light tone was not lost on Valmoon.

Tightening his grip, he replied, "So impatient! But there is no need to be. You shall meet her soon enough - when you have been prepared."

"Prepared for what?" Uhura whispered, not liking the way in which events were moving, and very much afraid of hearing the answer to her question.

"The ritual sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?" Uhura's eyes widened with fear. "But why? What do you want from us? We came here to help, and you..."

At Uhura's words Valmoon's eyes began to glitter dangerously in the torchlight. His voice hardened, taking on a roughness which hadn't been present before. "Only with the sacrifice of one of their number will the outworlders leave Melakron, and then this planet will be mine - the people will be mine - as I have always planned - as it has been ordained by Aventura. With the power I command I will be able to..." He broke off, suddenly aware that he had revealed too much. But what did that matter? This ebony-skinned woman would soon be dead, and even if that failed to persuade her friends to leave, there were other methods at his disposal. Her death would be a means to an end.

"Come - it is time to leave. Aventura grows tired of waiting."

Determined, Uhura stood her ground, desperately playing for time. "You won't get away with this, you know. If you think that by killing me my friends will leave quietly, you're very much mistaken. They won't be satisfied until this madness has been brought to an end..."

"Be silent! You have said enough!" Roughly, the Melakron dragged Uhura over to the opening and pushed her through into the outer cave, where half a dozen of his followers were waiting. "Take her away and prepare her. The sacrifice will take place at noon, at the Circle of the Sacred Stones."

As a struggling Uhura was led away, Valmoon turned and re-entered the inner cave...

\* \* \*

The Captain and First Officer were the last of the search parties to return to the settlement, and as they had feared, not one of the other groups appeared to have met with any success. As they entered the compound, McCoy hurried to meet them, but the sombre expression on the doctor's face did nothing to raise Kirk's spirits.

"I see you've had as much luck as Spock and I," he remarked.



McCoy sighed. "Nothing at all, Jim. It's almost as though Uhura has vanished off the face of this planet - there's no trace of her anywhere."

Kirk frowned. "There must be something more we can do - something we've overlooked..." He broke off as a tall figure left one of the search parties and came towards them. Kirk recognised him as Alex Newbury, the worried young man of the previous evening.

"Captain... may I have a word with you?" he asked.

"Of course. Did you have any luck?"

"Well... yes - and no."

Kirk raised a questioning eyebrow, unconsciously emulating Spock. "Explain."

"We didn't find your missing officer, sir... or Angharad... but there is a possibility that we may have discovered where they are being held."

Newbury's clear voice had carried across the compound, and soon a small crowd had gathered around the four men. At the mention of Angharad's name, Llewelyn had pushed closer to the front.

"As we searched, we came across a group of natives in a clearing. Oh, it's okay, they didn't see us," he added hastily, noticing Kirk's alarmed expression. "It was obvious that they were waiting for someone, and while we watched, they began talking amongst themselves. We couldn't hear all their conversation, but we did catch brief snatches - there were vague mutterings of sacrifices..."

"Sacrifices!" McCoy exclaimed, a note of alarm in his voice. "What kind of people are these, that they can allow such things to happen...?"

Impatiently, Kirk gestured at McCoy to be quiet; they had no time to waste on useless ejaculations. He motioned to the young man to continue.

"There's not much left to tell, Captain. There was a great deal of discussion about the sacrifices being 'the will of the gods', and that, if they were pleased, then the 'strangers' - meaning us - would leave. But, what was more worrying, they said something about 'the Dark One must be prepared'. Then, at a signal from one of the men, who must have been keeping watch some short distance away, they all headed towards the mountains... and disappeared."

As Alex concluded his story a deathly hush fell over the assembled group. Finally, Kirk pulled himself together.

"Does anyone have any idea at all there this... sacrifice could take place?"

Llewelyn spoke up. "I've heard mention of an area which could be used for such... activities." The doctor's voice trembled slightly, as though he couldn't bring himself to say the word 'sacrifice', with all its fearful connotations. "The natives call it the 'Circle of Sacred Stones'. It's situated about half a kilometer from here, at the base of Aventura, a still-active volcano. At first, I must admit that we were rather worried about settling in an area which could, quite possibly, experience volcanic activity, however slight. However, when we weighed the obvious advantages - rich mineral deposits, fertile soil, for example - against the disadvantages, we felt that it was worth taking the risks. Fortunately, we've been lucky so far; we haven't witnessed any violent volcanic activity, although there have been very slight earth tremors - increasing in frequency - of late. At first, they did tend to frighten us, but now... well, now we tend to ignore them, to accept them without worrying, in much the same way as the natives: they have obviously accepted such movements as a normal way of life, and nothing to be feared. Anyway, it appears that in the past, the Circle often provided the setting for religious ceremonies, marriages, and the like."

"Then what are we waiting for?" McCoy demanded, ever the impatient one.

"While we're standing around here calmly discussing this, heaven only knows what could be happening to those girls!"

Before McCoy could speak further, Spock interposed smoothly, "The Doctor does have a valid point, gentlemen." He bithely ignored the splutter, which was hastily turned into a cough, that issued from somewhere behind him, and continued, "I suggest that we proceed to this... place as quickly as possible. It is my belief that there is very little time left to us, and that if we are to save Ms. Uhura and Dr. Llewelyn's finacee from an untimely death, we should leave now."

As McCoy opened his mouth to remark that it wasn't often Spock actually agreed with him, he caught the warning look on Kirk's face: now was neither the time nor the place for one of their proverbial word-battles. Too much was at stake - the lives of Uhura and Angharad depended on whatever action they were prepared to take. McCoy subsided, defeated for the moment, and Kirk addressed Llewelyn.

"I take it you know the way to this circle?"

The doctor nodded.

"Good. Then let's do as Mr. Spock has suggested - I think we've wasted enough time here." So saying, Kirk turned on his heel and headed out of the compound, leaving his colleagues to follow at their own pace.

Although the distance from the compound to Aventura was not very great McCoy, at least, felt as though they had covered a hundred kilometers instead of not quite one. As no-one knew for certain precisely what they would find when they arrived at the Circle, the journey was made in comparative silence, each man lost in his own thoughts. Indeed, what desultory comments there were had entirely ceased by the time the periphery of the Stones was reached.

Llewelyn had taken the lead some time earlier, and now he signalled to the others to approach quietly lest they be detected. It was fortunate that the undergrowth surrounding the Circle was dense enough to provide adequate cover, for the last thing they wanted was to startle Valmoon into taking a disastrous step which could end in tragedy.

The Circle nestled at the base of Aventura, partly surrounded by sparse forest land, and as Llewelyn gazed on the scene he felt a momentary shiver. For a second it was almost as though he had been transported back into his own Celtic heritage, so closely did the Circle resemble the ancient Druid stones of Old Wales. How many pagan religious rites had these Stones been witness to, he wondered.

Abruptly, the doctor was brought back to the present by the sound of muffled voices approaching from the east: Valmoon and his followers came into view, and with them were... yes, he could see them clearly now... Uhura... and Angharad! The Bantu woman was putting up a brave fight, vainly struggling with her captors, while Angharad was being 'helped' by Valmoon - she appeared to be unconscious. Llewelyn felt his stomach twist: if he ever laid hands on that... that...

"Doctor?" The whispered voice cut in on his thoughts, and he turned to meet Kirk's concerned gaze.

"Yes, Captain - I see them."

"Are you all right?" It was a gentle enquiry.

There was no disguising the determination in Llewelyn's voice as he replied, "I will be."

At his words, Kirk felt a stab of anxiety: while he could understand - and sympathise with - Llewelyn's plight, he didn't want the doctor rushing headlong into what could become a dangerous situation. If they were to save the girls, caution and care were required. However, for the present at least, Llewelyn seemed content to wait - and follow Kirk's lead - and for that the Captain was grateful.

In grim silence, the four men watched as the drama continued to unfurl only scant meters away from their hiding place.

The unconscious biologist was securely bound, gagged and left on the perimeter of the Stones, and although Illewyn stiffened at the rough treatment she received, he made no other move. Kirk's eyes, meanwhile, were riveted on his Communications Officer who, it must be stated, was putting up a brave fight. Despite the deadly seriousness of the scene which they were witnessing, Kirk couldn't help the small smile that played about his lips at the sight of the diminutive woman fighting and struggling with two of Valmoon's tallest - and strongest - henchmen.

//Trust Uhura,// he thought. //As stubborn and determined as always. Now, if only she can hold out a little longer.//

His wish was not fulfilled. Overpowered - but by no means defeated - Uhura was dragged to the raised, flat-topped sacrificial dais, strategically situated in the centre of the Circle, and securely fastened. She had, indeed, been 'prepared' for the ritual: gone was the familiar Starfleet uniform, and in its place was a simply-cut, floor length gown in dazzling white - the symbol of sacrificial purity - and a colour which off-set her dark beauty.

Valmoon stepped forward to test that the bonds holding his victim were secure, before lifting his eyes to the midday sky. Then, without a word, he motioned to his followers to leave. They obeyed without question, until only two remained as guards. Obviously, the time was not yet right...

With the abrupt departure of Valmoon and his followers, the silent watchers saw their chance to put their hastily-contrived rescue plan into action. By mute consent, it was agreed that Spock and McCoy were the obvious candidates for the task: Spock because - hopefully - he was better suited to deal with Valmoon's suspected telepathic ability; and McCoy - well, his qualifications spoke for themselves, for Angharad, at least, seemed to be in need of his unquestioned medical skills. Although Kirk disliked - intensely - his non-active role in the proceedings, even he was forced to concede to the logic of the situation. However, what he found most difficult was the knowledge that, once again, he was sending his two closest friends into danger: it was the one aspect of his command position which he hated, and he doubted that he would ever become accustomed to it, for with each new danger, the decisions became increasingly difficult.

Without a sound, the two men slipped out of their hiding place, each going their separate ways. Spock unobtrusively skirted the Stones to take up his position behind the man guarding Angharad, while McCoy, without any attempt at concealment, walked blatantly towards Uhura's 'escort'. The plan was to distract both guards sufficiently so that Spock could employ the ever-useful neck pinch before he could be detected, and make good his - and Angharad's - escape.

The plan worked to perfection. Thoroughly enjoying his role as one of the principal players in the drama, McCoy walked up to the Melakron. Before the stunned man could say - or more importantly, do - anything, there was the hiss of a well-aimed hypo, and he crumpled at McCoy's feet.

"Boy - that neural paralysers sure comes in handy at times," the doctor chuckled as he glanced over to see how Spock was faring. He needn't have worried: Angharad's guard had already been rendered harmless, and Spock was carefully lowering his burden to the ground, before he turned his attention to the unconscious girl.

Satisfied that all was progressing as it should be, McCoy moved across to Uhura, and gently began to unfasten the bonds that imprisoned her. Once free of the gag - which Valmoon had seen fit to use in an attempt at keeping her quiet - Uhura exclaimed,

"Dr. McCoy! Am I pleased to see you! Is the Captain with you?"

"Of course he is - you just try keeping him out of this," McCoy replied, keeping up the playful bantering, for although Uhura's tone was light, there was no mistaking the relieved look in the dark eyes, which seemed to say, //Thanks

for saving us. This time I really thought the end had come.//

"Don't worry, everything's going to be fine," he reassured as he helped Uhura off the dais.

"I seem to remember you saying something to that effect yesterday," she retorted, with a weak smile, "and just look what happened!"

McCoy was about to reply to Uhura's teasing remarks when a slight movement off to his left caught his eye. The smile froze on his lips as he pushed Uhura towards the comparative safety of the undergrowth.

"Run!" he muttered through clenched teeth.

"What...?"

"Do as you're told - get out of here!"

There was no disguising the urgency in McCoy's voice. Uhura turned and ran, even as Valmoon and his followers emerged from the undergrowth.

With a snarl of rage that his plans had been frustrated once again, Valmoon threw himself at McCoy before the doctor had a chance to move.

"Doctor!"

The shout came from behind him. Spock had sensed the danger, but before he could warn McCoy, the doctor was surrounded and outnumbered. Without any thought for his own safety, the Vulcan tried desperately to reach his friend - without success. Within minutes he too was overpowered.

"Outworlders!" Valmoon spat out the word, his voice trembling with barely controlled anger. "When will you learn that you are not welcome here?"

He snapped his fingers, and McCoy was hustled forward.

"As a result of your interference it seems I have lost my sacrificial victim. But no matter - you will serve the same purpose. The hour approaches, and Aventura must be appeased."

History repeated itself as McCoy was securely fastened to the stone dais where Uhura had lain only moments before.

"Let the ceremony begin."

At his signal, Valmoon's supporters formed a semi-circle around the central stone, their eyes steadfastly fixed on Aventura's loyal servant. The latter raised his arms skyward and began to chant - a strange, ritualistic intonation spoken in guttural Melakronese. As the words uttered began to rise in crescendo, the listeners began to sway in unison, totally mesmerised, and as the chanting continued, their voices joined with Valmoon's.

From his hiding place, Kirk felt the hairs on the back of his neck start to prickle as the implications of the ceremony became increasingly clear. He had learned enough from Uhura to know that Valmoon would stop at nothing in his plan to be rid of the "Outworlders", and if he didn't do something soon, then McCoy would become the helpless victim of a power-crazed madman.

As the voices died away, a deathly hush fell over the Circle. There was a flash of sunlight on steel as Valmoon lifted the sacrificial knife high above his head, before it began its downward path on a journey which could only end in tragedy.

"No!"

As Valmoon's intention became only too clear, Spock began a desperate struggle with his captors. Superior Vulcan strength soon gained the upper hand, and he lunged towards Valmoon. With one swift movement his hand shot out and gripped the Melakron's wrist, arresting the downward thrust of the knife.

For several heart-stopping minutes there followed a frantic struggle for supremacy, mental as well as physical, as Valmoon used his latent telepathic powers to control the Vulcan and bend him to his will. Against the violence of

the Melakron's mental attack, Spock felt his own shields beginning to weaken.

He fought to hold on... for McCoy's sake... for all their sakes... but as the onslaught continued it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain control. Desperately, he tried to tear his eyes away from Valmoon's penetrating gaze, a gaze which seemed to pierce through to his very soul. Thoughts which were not his own began to push their way to the surface of his mind: vile thoughts, evil thoughts - and he felt powerless to resist, powerless to turn away.

And in that moment Valmoon knew that he had won - knew that the Vulcan was in his power.

"Let the sacrifice continue!" he ordered.

Like a somnambulist, Spock turned and accepted the proffered knife, his face totally devoid of expression, the brown eyes empty and lifeless. Slowly, he raised his arm.

Beneath him McCoy lay paralysed, the fear-filled blue eyes closed against the sight of one of his best friends bent on murderous intent. He ran his tongue over dry lips, and tried to swallow the lump which had formed in his throat. As he braced himself for what was to come, a single thought flashed through his mind.

//Never, in my worst nightmare, did I think my life would end like this.//

Scant meters away, Kirk watched helplessly as Spock, powerless to control his actions, brought the knife nearer and nearer to his helpless victim. Unless he acted soon the Vulcan, through no fault of his own, would kill their friend, and that was something Kirk couldn't allow to happen. Surely they hadn't saved Uhura only for McCoy's life to be forfeit.

The knife was poised mere inches above the doctor's heart. One swift lunge and he would be...

"NO!" Kirk cried, the naked anguish all too apparent in the hoarse voice. "SPOCK! DON'T! IT'S MCCOY!"

Whether it was the sound of Kirk's voice, filled with anxiety, cutting through the still air, or whether Spock's own self-control had re-asserted itself at last, the Captain was unable to tell; but the downward flight of the knife suddenly stopped.

Spock stiffened, as though he had been struck, as the oh-so-familiar voice broke in on his thoughts. With renewed strength he fought to free himself of the entity which was struggling to control him. As reality returned, his grip on the knife slackened and it fell, unnoticed, to the ground. Slowly, he allowed his hands to drop limply to his sides, his eyes riveted on the friend he had been about to kill. The awareness of what he had been about to do was too much for him. He gave a stifled moan, and stumbled blindly from the Circle, heading for the direction of the compound.

At the sight of such open misery, Kirk wished only to follow his friend, to offer what little comfort he could, but at this moment his duty lay with the doctor.

Hurriedly, Kirk dashed to McCoy's side, his fingers struggling to release the bonds which fastened him to the dais. That done, he helped his friend to a sitting position, gently supporting him while the doctor took several deep breaths to calm his rapidly beating heart. That had been a near thing, he thought. For a moment it had almost looked as though Spock would have... He shuddered and the movement was not lost on Kirk, who gave him a reassuring smile.

"You okay, Bones?"

"Yeah, Jim - I think so. Whew, that was a close shave - in more ways than one. For a moment there, I really thought my end had come. If you hadn't shouted when you did..." He pushed the thought away, and made an attempt at one of his familiar grins.

During the furore which had followed the aborted sacrifice, Valmoon and his followers had slipped silently away, and in seconds had melted into the background. When Kirk glanced around for the Melakrons, he found that he and his party were alone. He signalled to Uhura, who left Llewelyn and Angharad, and hurried to join them.

Coming to a decision, he said, "Uhura - look after the doctor for me. I'll see you back at the compound."

As Kirk moved to follow the path that Spock had taken several minutes earlier, McCoy caught at his arm, halting him.

"No, Jim - let him alone for a while."

Impatiently, Kirk threw off the restraining hand. "He needs help, Bones. I must go to him. Please - let me go."

"Jim - Spock needs time to work this out for himself. After what almost happened here... well, how do you expect him to face us?"

"If I do as you say - if I do leave him alone - he'll think we don't understand, that we're condemning him for what's happened. That's not true - you know that. He's been hurt, Bones - and I can't stand by and watch him suffer, not when I may be able to help."

The hazel eyes held a mute appeal for understanding, and something else - approval? McCoy wasn't sure, but he did know that Kirk wouldn't rest until he had seen that Spock was all right.

//And that's what friendship is all about, isn't it?// he thought. //Understanding, care, the ability to help when a loved one is in trouble...// McCoy sighed. The special bond which the three of them shared was unique - it held them together no matter what happened, through the rough as well as the smooth; but it also meant that if one of them was hurting, they all hurt.

McCoy realised that he'd been silent for too long, and his gaze softened as he noticed the worried expression on Kirk's face. He smiled then - a smile which brought warmth to the blue eyes - and said, softly,

"Go to him - and tell him..." He paused, uncertain whether or not to put his thoughts into words.

"I will, Bones - I will," Kirk replied, silently acknowledging the unspoken message. With a reassuring smile he hurried away, and in minutes the gold-shirted figure had been swallowed up in the undergrowth.

\* \* \*

Keeping up a steady pace, Kirk quickly arrived at the compound. There had been no sign of Spock during the short journey, and the Captain believed that his first guess - that the Vulcan had returned to their shared quarters - had been correct. Acting on intuition he approached the cabin and slowly pushed the door open. As a beam of light illuminated the interior, he made his way over to the pitiful figure huddled in the corner.

Kneeling down, Kirk reached out and gently gripped the heaving shoulders.

At his touch, Spock flinched away, and the slight movement cut through the Human like a knife. Somehow, he had to reach Spock: let him know that he understood, that he didn't blame him for what had almost happened.

"Spock... please... listen to me..." he began.

"No... leave me alone..." The whispered words ended in a soft moan as Spock tried, unsuccessfully, to pull himself away from the comforting touch.

"Spock... I want to help you..."

At the mention of the word 'help', Spock made an effort to raise his head and meet Kirk's anxious gaze for the first time. There was a look of incredulity in the dark, fathomless eyes fixed on his friend's face.

"You want to help me... after what I tried to do? If you had not intervened I would have killed McCoy!"

A shudder ran through the lean frame as he remembered a similar situation, a similar nightmare, when it had been Kirk whom he had almost killed. If it had not been for McCoy's quick thinking on that occasion... And now history had almost repeated itself - except that this time the victim had very nearly been another close friend.

He forced himself to meet Kirk's eyes, noting the worry which his friend was trying - unsuccessfully - to conceal, knowing that he would have to try and explain a little of what he was 'feeling', for he owed Kirk - and McCoy - that much, at least. Perhaps they might even understand - but as to whether they could forgive...

"Once before, on Vulcan, I almost killed you: the one person whom I was not ashamed to call friend; the one person who was more important to me than my own life," Spock said, his voice almost dropping to a whisper. "Then, when McCoy and I were thrown back into Sarpeidon's Ice Age, I began to revert..." he shuddered at the memory, "to become... a Vulcan of pre-Reform days, from a world of violence and barbarism. During a fit of blind rage I... very nearly killed McCoy."

"My two best friends - and on separate occasions they both had nearly met their deaths at my hand. I vowed then that I would never knowingly hurt either of you again. I have kept that vow... until today." His voice trailed away into silence.

"Spock - that wasn't you: you weren't responsible for what happened back there. It was Valmoon's doing - he was controlling you. He wants the Federation off this planet and he doesn't care what method he uses to fulfil that wish. He used his own powers of telepathy to take over your mind."

"But the fact remains: I could have killed McCoy - I would have killed him if you..." The voice was hoarse, unlike Spock's usually mellow tones, as though his barely controlled emotions would snap at any moment.

"Spock... you said yourself that you would never knowingly hurt either of us: the key word is 'knowingly' - you didn't know what you were doing."

Spock turned away, refusing to meet Kirk's eyes, refusing to be convinced, and in that instant the pieces of the jigsaw began to fall into place. Kirk breathed a sigh of relief: so that's what was worrying his friend. His voice gentle, he asked, "You don't believe that McCoy blames you for what happened, do you?"

"Jim... how can I expect you to understand? How can I ask you to forgive... to trust me again?"

There was only one way to answer the mute appeal in Spock's eyes - he needed far greater reassurance than mere words could provide.

Gathering the Vulcan in his arms, Kirk cradled Spock's head on his shoulder and supported him until the violent storm of his deeply-buried emotions spent itself.

When the storm finally abated, Kirk gently raised the tear-streaked face to meet his own questioning gaze.

"Better now?" he asked, softly.

Spock nodded. "I am sorry, Jim... I should not have lost control like that. I..."

"Hey - there's no need to apologise... believe me, I do know how you feel, so don't be embarrassed, okay?"

"Thank you for understanding, Jim - and helping."

"You've helped me enough in the past," Kirk replied, a warm twinkle



lighting the hazel eyes. "It's about time I started to return the favour. But, seriously though, I want you to promise me something: whatever happens in the future - to any of us - I want us to face it together, as we've always done. Please, Spock - promise me that you'll never shut me out again. I can face almost anything but that. It hurts so much when you turn away from me... Will you promise?"

Not trusting himself to speak, Spock gave an almost imperceptible nod, before allowing a relieved sigh to escape from his lips. How could he have doubted? No matter what happened, Kirk would always be there to help - and understand: for Jim Kirk always understood.

The sound of voices outside their quarters helped to break the highly charged atmosphere within.

"Do you feel up to joining the outside world?" Kirk asked quietly, smiling affectionately at his companion.

"Of course, Captain." The reply was quick, the tone as formal as usual, but not even Spock could conceal the glitter of amusement which lurked in the depths of the dark eyes.

Jumping to his feet in one swift movement, Kirk extended his hand to the Vulcan as, at the same moment, they heard a familiar voice calling to them from outside.

"Jim! Spock!"

Kirk grinned. "Well, there certainly doesn't seem to be anything wrong with Bones' vocal cords." He helped Spock to his feet. "Come on - 'there's no rest for the wicked', as my mother used to say."

"Indeed. The doctor appears to be his usual ebullient self," Spock remarked quietly, as they made their way outside to see what all the fuss was about.

"Oh, there you are - I was about to send out another search party," McCoy remarked, before adding - by way of explanation - "I thought you'd both disappeared." The tone was light, almost teasing, but the blue eyes asked a different question: the look was not lost on either of the two men.

"It's okay, Bones - there's no need to panic. We're both fine."

"Spock?" The playful tone had disappeared, to be replaced with a note of concern.

"I am... recovered, Doctor. I trust you are none the worse for your... experience?" Spock asked quietly. "I wish to apologise to you for causing such... distress..."

"I'm fine, Spock," McCoy interrupted quickly, recognising the Vulcan's need to make amends for their misunderstanding. He chuckled. "But I hope you didn't think you could get rid of me as easily as that!"

"Indeed not, Doctor - the idea had never occurred to me. Besides which, what would we do without you?" The question, to which Spock did not really expect an answer, was coupled with the inevitable raised eyebrow.

McCoy spluttered, realising that the Vulcan was teasing him in his own inimitable way, but he refrained from comment - for once!

Uhura had joined the three men in time to catch the last remarks. "I see everything is back to normal," she said, a broad smile lighting the beautiful features.

Kirk grinned, an expression of relief all too apparent in the hazel eyes. "It certainly looks like it," he agreed. "Things can't be too serious when those two can indulge in their favourite pastime of baiting each other! But..."

and he turned his attention to his two friends, "in case you had forgotten, gentlemen, our problems here have not been solved. Valmoon still..."

"Captain! Captain Kirk!" Llewelyn's familiar voice interrupted from behind the small group.

The doctor, with a much-recovered Angharad, had approached silently, and Kirk smiled his welcome. "I'm pleased to see that you are none the worse for your experience," he said, directing his remark at the biologist.

"I'm fine now, Captain - and thank you. Arfion has been telling me of the part you and your officers played in my rescue. If it hadn't been for your help, goodness only knows what would have happened."

"Captain - I think there is someone here who can help us with our little 'problem'. Talish wishes to speak with you," Llewelyn remarked, indicating the stranger who awaited them on the edge of the compound.

The newcomer was tall, slim-built, and was dressed in the traditional buckskin tunic and soft pants, a style greatly favoured by many of the natives. The fringed tunic was girded at the waist with a leather belt, from which hung a pouch and an impressive-looking hunting knife. His long hair was fastened at the nape of his neck, and was allowed to hang loosely down his back, instead of in the plaits which appeared to be the usual practice among the Melakrons. Even if Kirk had not been informed of the stranger's identity, he would have had no difficulty in recognising him, for the resemblance between the two brothers was striking.

Talish approached slowly, concern showing clearly on the tanned face. "I come on behalf of my people, to offer help in any way we can, and to make amends for the treatment you have received at my brother's hand. As a result of his actions, Valmoon has brought shame to our tribe - and to my father's name. It causes us much sorrow that you have been subjected to such distress. I ask your forgiveness."

"There is nothing to forgive," Kirk answered gently, painfully aware that he had used similar words not so long ago - only then they had been directed at his closest friend. Now, it seemed that his forgiveness was required for a different matter. He continued softly, "You are not responsible for your brother's actions."

Talish sighed. "I wish it were that simple, but I am afraid that I am partly to blame. If I had realised sooner, guessed what Valmoon was planning, I might have been able to stop him..." He paused for a moment, deep in thought, before continuing, "Even as a boy, Valmoon was different from the rest of us - always withdrawn, secretive. I suppose he must have inherited those traits from his mother..."

"His mother?" Kirk interrupted, puzzled. "But I thought that you and he..."

Talish smiled. "Valmoon is my half-brother, Captain. His mother was my father's second wife, but she died when Valmoon was little more than a baby. Consequently, his upbringing was sadly neglected. My father tried, but it wasn't easy. He was always a difficult child, so it wasn't surprising that, as he grew up, he came to be regarded as the 'black sheep' of the family."

"Was there any particular reason for that?" Kirk asked, eager for anything that would shed new light on their problem.

Talish looked surprised at the question. "Of course - he possessed the gift," he said, as though that explained everything. Seeing the puzzled faces around him he added, by way of explanation, "He was able to read minds, influence the thoughts and actions of others - an ability inherited from his mother, and passed on from generation to generation."

"Rather like a primitive form of hypnotism," McCoy stated.

"Not so primitive, Bones. Remember - Valmoon was strong enough to bend

Spock to his will," Kirk remarked.

McCoy shuddered at the memory. "How can I forget?" he asked.

"As a result of this, Valmoon was greatly feared by our people," Talish continued. "Whereas his mother used her gift wisely, he used it to suit his own purposes, and since he joined the sect of devil-worshippers - four seasons ago - rumour has been rife that he may have hastened our father's death in order to take over the control of Melakron. He has always objected to your People's presence here, Captain - he sees the Federation as a threat to his newly-found influence. He wants you removed from here, and he saw his chance of using his power to frighten you away."

"So the kidnapping of Uhura, and my near brush with death, were all parts of his plan to 'persuade' us to leave?" McCoy asked.

Talish nodded. "I'm very sorry that you were the innocent victim of Valmoon's distorted plans. Sacrifices of such a nature were brought to an end many years ago."

"Then we are correct in assuming that such ritualistic beliefs did exist - sacrifices were carried out?" Spock asked.

"Unfortunately - yes. Long ago, certain groups existed which believed that the mountain range, named Aventura, contained the homes of Melakron's gods, and that, if they were appeased, nothing evil could befall the land..."

"Superstitious mumbo-jumbo!" McCoy muttered, partly under his breath, until a glare from Kirk silenced him before he could comment further.

Ignoring the outburst, Talish continued, "That was during the time of the Ancients, when superstition was rife amongst my people. Now, they are not so easily led, although Valmoon and his followers have tried to convert others to their way. But we are people of peace, Captain - we have no wish to follow a path which will only lead to violence and the destruction of everything we hold dear..."

"Have you tried to stop him?" Kirk asked.

"What can we do? We have tried to talk - but what use is that? He will not listen to us, as he believes us to be weaklings interested only in the ways of peace. My people are afraid: they greatly fear the power which Valmoon commands... I cannot reason with a madman!"

"Well - reason with him we must," Kirk stated emphatically. "Talish - we too are a people of peace. In the past, we have found that violence is not the way to find a solution to a problem; that, on occasion, the words of peace can prove more effective. Let's at least try. Find Valmoon - arrange a place for us to meet. Who knows what may come of it - but we have to succeed. I should hate to see your beautiful world destroyed by what could so easily turn into a civil war."

Talish pondered Kirk's words for some time, before rising slowly to his feet. "You speak wisely - hopefully, what you say will come true. I will go now. Meet me at the Circle in two of your hours - I shall see to it that Valmoon is there."

And with that, he turned and hurried from the compound, leaving his new-found allies to occupy themselves during the intervening hours as best they could.

\* \* \*

At the appointed hour Kirk and the others retraced their steps on the path they had taken earlier, and arrived at the Circle, McCoy suppressing a shudder at the painful memories evoked by his first sight of the sinister Stones. Also included in the party, at her own insistence, was Uhura, although Kirk would have preferred her to remain behind in the comparative safety of the compound. However, one look at the flashing dark eyes, and the determined lift of her chin, and Kirk hastily agreed to her accompanying them.

The Circle was deserted when they arrived. Spock glanced round him curiously, his Vulcan composure now completely restored. "Do you think they will come, Captain?" he asked.

Kirk shrugged. "Who knows? I sincerely hope so. Talish, more than anyone, wants to see an end to this futile struggle for power, and I can't say that I blame him. Now is as good a time as any to air their differences. Perhaps if they meet face to face, discuss matters as responsible adults..."

"Expecting miracles again, Jim?" McCoy asked, a broad grin on his face.

"No, Bones - just hoping," Kirk retorted. "Why? Don't you think they'll show up?"

"Well - I don't want to sound pessimistic, but would you walk into what could turn out to be a carefully-arranged trap?"

Before Kirk could think of a suitable reply, Spock interrupted smoothly, "Why, Doctor, I was not aware that beneath that cynical exterior you were such a cheerful soul at heart."

While Kirk hurriedly turned away to hide his amusement, McCoy opened his mouth to retaliate, and quickly thought better of it. He wasn't too sure whether he had just been complimented or insulted, and until he decided which...

He threw a quick glance at the Vulcan, but received no answer there: Spock's mask was firmly in place once more. Instead, he contented himself with, "Well, gentlemen - it looks as though you're about to have your prayers answered. Take a look over there."

From either side of the clearing, two groups emerged: on the right, Talish and the Elders of the tribe; on the left Valmoon and his 'shadows', the latter still heavily robed and cowed, as though afraid to reveal their faces to those not of the sect. Or perhaps cowardice was the real reason. Whatever it was, Kirk had no time to ponder on that just at the moment.

For a few minutes there was an uneasy silence as each group eyed the other speculatively. Valmoon stood defiantly, aggression all-too-apparent in his very stance; while Talish, the man of peace, swallowed nervously before meeting his brother's gaze without flinching.

Valmoon stepped forward, his eyes blazing with anger as he registered the presence of the strangers. He advanced threateningly on his half-brother.

"You lied! When you asked me to meet you here, you did not tell me that Outsiders would be present!"

Before Talish could reply, Kirk interrupted. "Valmoon - your brother is not to blame for this meeting. I asked him to bring you here. I thought we could talk, straighten things out..."

"I do not want your interference! Our ways are not your ways - when will you learn that we do not want you here?" Valmoon questioned, angrily.

"Valmoon - listen to me. They have come to help, not to interfere. We need to talk..." Talish said.

"I have no time for words - words are for weaklings, for people like you... and your new-found friends," Valmoon sneered.

"All I ask is that we sit down and talk this out, try to find a way to live peaceably together, before it's too late and you destroy our world with your madness. These people are willing to help us..."

"I do not need their help!" Valmoon shouted, almost spitting out the words. "All I want is for them to leave Melakron - they do not belong here!"

Talish sighed at the strength of his brother's words. When he had asked Valmoon to meet him at the Circle, he had known that the task ahead would not be an easy one. If only there was some way to persuade Valmoon to work with him, for the good of the tribe, instead of working against his own people.

He tried again. "It was our father's dearest wish that, after his death, we would rule Melakron together. Yet you turned away from us, shunned the family which had given you life, when we could work together for the common good..."

"You still don't understand, do you?" Valmoon snapped, finding that it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep control of his mounting anger. "Always it has been the same: as our father's second son, I counted for nothing - nothing! It was always you: you who would inherit - you who would eventually rule. Everything you did was always right, while I... I was always made to feel that everything I did was wrong, that because I was 'different'... I was unacceptable to my own family. Only amongst my own kind - outcasts like myself - could I find that acceptance, could I be myself..."

"But it was you who turned your back on your own people - your own family. You wanted nothing to do with us, particularly after you chose to join that sect of devil-worshippers, outcasts - as you said yourself - from your own society..."

"We are not devil-worshippers! As Aventura's servant, I serve the ancient gods. She has chosen me - me - to lead our people!"

"And how will you lead your people, Valmoon? Through fear? Can't you see that they are terrified of you, of what your power can do to them? They believe that you can see into their very souls, and it frightens them. My brother... let us forget the past, try to build a new life for ourselves - and our people. Our father would wish it... I wish it."

"You think you can persuade me with soft words, gentle actions? You are wrong! I am Valmoon! I will bow to no man..."

"Valmoon!" Kirk's voice interrupted, successfully silencing the Melakron's almost hysterical outburst. He had not wanted to interfere, preferring the two brothers to sort out their internal politics and differences of opinion in their own way, but he could see the path that events were taking: in his present state of mind, Valmoon was almost on the edge of insanity, so consumed was he with his jealousy of his brother's position as the elder son and ruler of their people.

"Listen to your brother, Valmoon," Kirk said, his voice low and persuasive. "He speaks wisely, and he is providing you with a solution to your problem: he is offering that which you covet most - or are you too blind to see it?"

"I will have none of your interference!" With a cry of rage, Valmoon threw himself at Kirk, catching the unsuspecting Captain momentarily off guard. He landed heavily, but before the Melakron could take advantage of the situation, Kirk had leapt to his feet in one swift movement, preparing himself for the next attack - but it never came. A second voice broke in, successfully stunning the two men into inaction.

"Stop it! Both of you! Can't you see that fighting won't solve the problem, won't achieve anything?" Uhura cried until, stunned by her own temerity, she fell silent. She threw her Captain an apologetic look, wordlessly asking for his support - and approval.

Understanding immediately what Uhura was trying to do, Kirk nodded slightly in encouragement, and drawing Talish to one side, left the 'stage' to his Communications Officer.

Trembling slightly, Uhura took a deep breath to try and steady her rapidly beating heart, which was thudding painfully against her ribs. Valmoon's mood could change at any moment, for although comparatively quiet at present, she knew from first-hand experience that he was capable of anything. Trying to keep her tone of voice reasonably calm, she began to talk, slowly, haltingly.

"I was born on a world very different from this one, yet in certain respects we share similar cultures, and I think I can understand how you feel. You see, my people are superstitious too... there are those amongst them who possess powers such as yours - and they are afraid: afraid of themselves - and others. But eventually they come to terms with their 'differences', realising that they are unique in their own way. Instead, they use their powers to help people, to heal

instead of harm. Your people do not hate you, Valmoon - they fear you, yes, but that is because they cannot understand you. Listen to your brother - let him help you. Together you can..."

At that precise moment, a terrifying rumble cut off Uhura's next words, and without warning the ground began to tremble beneath their feet. At first no-one - with the possible exception of the Enterprise crew - appeared too concerned, being comparatively used to the slight earth tremors which had become an accepted part of their lives.

"Don't worry," Llewelyn reassured them, noting the anxious expressions on the faces of the visitors, "as I told you earlier, we're used to this - there's nothing to be afraid of."

However, as the ground in their immediate vicinity continued vibrating, the tremors increased in intensity rather than subsided, and it soon became apparent that something was very wrong. There were frightened cries and shouts as natives and Federation personnel alike struggled vainly to maintain their footing, before failing and being thrown completely off balance.

"Oh my god - look!" The now-frightened party followed Llewelyn's pointing finger. "The volcano's going to erupt!"

Valmoon, his eyes shining with a strange, half-crazed light, a secret, all-knowing expression on his face, cried, "Aventura! She calls to me!"

Half turning, his gaze was transfixed on the vast mountain which loomed menacingly in the background. With a cry of triumph he scrambled to his feet, and hurried from the Circle towards Aventura - and certain death.

"Valmoon! Come back!" Talish cried, a genuine note of anxiety in his voice, but his brother either did not - or chose not to - hear, and within minutes the retreating back of the black-robed figure could be seen making his way, with great difficulty, up the hillside towards the uppermost vent.

Powerless to assist, the party on the ground watched in horror as the volcano erupted, causing a secondary vent to split open slightly above Valmoon's present position. Molten lava and hot ashes flowed from the opening. Within moments it would envelop the unfortunate Melakron, as he became caught in its relentless path.

"No!" Talish screamed. Scrambling to his feet, he made to follow his brother, but Kirk's restraining hand held him back.

"There's nothing you can do," he said gently, meeting the Melakron's fear-stricken gaze.

"But I must try to help him. Please - let me go to him." Talish struggled to free himself from Kirk's grasp.

"He is beyond help now." The words sounded harsh and unfeeling, but they had to be said. "There is nothing more you can do, for to follow would mean your death, too. Talish - you tried; you tried very hard. But in the end, Valmoon made his own choice. Perhaps - given the circumstances - it was the only choice he could make."

As the last rumbles died away, the recently-restored quietness was marred by an agonised scream - then there was nothing. Aventura had, indeed, claimed the servant who had served her so loyally for so long.

Terrified natives, having witnessed the unfortunate demise of their leader, scurried in all directions, stumbling blindly towards the relative safety of the undergrowth, and the uneasy silence which followed was broken by Kirk's softly-whispered words.

"What the gods give with one hand, it seems they can so easily take away with the other."

McCoy halted in his attempts at dusting himself down to give Kirk a penetrating - though worried - look. "You don't really believe that, do you, Jim?"

"No... but he did." He stooped to help Uhura to her feet, and after checking that everyone was all right - the only injuries appeared to be minor cuts and bruises caused by dislodged rocks and stones - it was a much-subdued group of people which slowly made its way back to the camp site.

\* \* \*

The following day dawned bright and clear, the brilliant sunshine only serving to emphasise the previous afternoon's tragic occurrence. In the distance a lone figure could be seen wending its way towards Aventura, following the same path which, a matter of hour earlier, had ended in tragedy.

Arriving at the base of the mountain range, Talish - guilt-ridden and grief-stricken - gazed upwards, shading his eyes against the sun's glare. Smoke continued to drift lazily from the vent, while scant meters below lava seeped unobtrusively from the secondary vent caused when the volcano erupted. Any secret hopes which Talish might have harboured - that perhaps by some miracle of fate or spiritual intervention Valmoon might have survived the eruption - were dashed in an instant, and he struggled to come to terms with the fact that Valmoon would not be returning. It was a tragic end to what had become an unnecessary and distressing incident.

Greatly subdued, the weight of his responsibilities to his tribe lying heavily on his shoulders, Talish turned his back on Aventura - the so-called god who, however inadvertently, had caused so much sorrow - and left his brother's final resting place, slowly returning to the people who needed him.

\* \* \*

Two days later, their survey of Melakron complete, Kirk and his officers had returned to the shuttlecraft to make last-minute preparations prior to leaving. While McCoy supervised the removal and unpacking of the much-needed medical supplies and equipment, Kirk took the opportunity to exchange a few last minute words with Llewelyn. The doctor and his team would be remaining on Melakron for a further three months before returning to Terra to report their findings to the interested authorities.

They were deep in conversation when Kirk sensed that someone was approaching, and was not surprised to see Talish coming towards them. He noted the sad expression on the Melakron's face, and felt a flood of sympathy for this man who had lost so much.

"I see you will be leaving soon," Talish remarked, indicating the hive of industry surrounding them. "But I wanted to say my farewells - and to thank you for all that you have done."

"I wish it could have been more," Kirk replied, softly. "Please believe me when I say how sorry we all are. How I wish matters could have ended differently, that there was something more we could have done to help. I feel so responsible. Perhaps if we hadn't come, hadn't interfered..."

"Please do not blame yourself for what happened, Captain. With or without your presence, who can say that the same thing would not have occurred? You saw for yourself how unstable Valmoon was, always seeing enemies where there were none, how he desired power above all else - even, it seems, his own life. If anyone is to blame, Captain, it is I. Perhaps if I had behaved differently towards him, sympathised with him instead of blaming him, all this might have been avoided. But he made his own choice, and maybe now he has found the happiness for which he searched most of his life... I sincerely hope so."

He paused for a moment, too choked to continue, before adding, "Forgive me, gentlemen, but it is time that I returned to my people..." Abruptly, he turned and hurried from the clearing, not wishing to cause the 'Outworlders' further embarrassment, leaving behind two very concerned men.

Llewelyn watched him go, a sober expression on the handsome features. He sighed. "There were many times over the past few weeks when I wished... even prayed... for an end to the problems which had seemed to beset us almost from



the moment we arrived on Melakron. Then, when Angharad disappeared, and I saw what could have happened to her if it hadn't been for your timely intervention, well... I will admit that, given the opportunity, I could have killed Valmoon.

"But now... now I think I can understand him, can even sympathise with him in a way. It couldn't have been easy always to live in the shadow of an elder brother, and the fact that he inherited such an unwanted 'gift' wouldn't help matters. Perhaps if there had been someone he could have turned to, someone who could have helped him to understand - and control - his powers, all of this might have been avoided. But that is something we shall never know, and idle speculation seems rather pointless. At least the remaining months here should prove beneficial now that we can count on the help of the Melakrons."

"I hope everything goes smoothly for you from now on," Kirk said.

"Oh, I think they will now, Captain - I can't foresee any real problems in the near future."

"And we've fixed your communications system, so you shouldn't have any 'problems' from that quarter either," Uhura interrupted with a smile, as she and Spock joined the two men.

"I do not wish to contradict you, Lieutenant," Spock remarked smoothly, "but if I remember correctly, you repaired the fault yourself, without any assistance from me. I was there merely as an observer."

"Why - thank you, Mr. Spock. I believe you have just paid me a compliment," Uhura replied, momentarily taken aback - yet secretly pleased - by Spock's confidence in her ability.

"What's this - a mutual appreciation society?" McCoy commented, coming up in time to overhear the last remarks. "If Spock, here, is handing out compliments, I think I'd better give him a thorough medical when we get back to the Enterprise: he might not be feeling too well."

Hurriedly, Kirk interrupted him, a note of warning in his voice. "Okay, Bones - don't start."

"Start what?" McCoy asked, innocently.

"You know very well what I mean. Now - if everyone is ready, I think it's time we took our leave..."

Pleasantries were exchanged, farewells made, and finally the Enterprise party were ready to leave the world where, in the space of a few days, so much had happened. As the shuttlecraft doors closed, Llewelyn drew Angharad to one side, and they watched as the Columbus rose gracefully into the air, gained height, and eventually disappeared from view.

Feeling suddenly alone, the doctor slipped his arm around Angharad's shoulders, drawing her close, and without a backward glance, they turned and quietly left the clearing, heading towards the compound and the resumption of their interrupted lives.

\* \* \*

On board the shuttle, McCoy leaned back in his seat and emitted a sigh of relief. "Well - I can't say I'm sorry to be leaving Melakron. That's one experience I shan't forget in a hurry."

"Oh, I don't know," Uhura remarked, a mischievous twinkle lighting her eyes. "There were compensations."

McCoy grunted. "Such as?"

"Well - at least it gave me a chance to get out of uniform, even if only for a little while."

Remembering the stunning sight Uhura had presented in her 'sacrificial' white gown, McCoy started to grin, a wicked expression in the blue eyes.

"Yes, perhaps you're right - perhaps you're right, after all. Maybe our visit to Melakron did have one - or two - compensations."

As Uhura's laughter blended with McCoy's, Kirk smiled inwardly, relieved that everything was now back to normal. The distressing affair on Melakron had been unfortunate, to say the least, and even now he couldn't quite make up his mind whether the events of the preceeding days had been caused through fate or coincidence.

Was it really the hand of fate which had caused Aventura to erupt at that precise moment, or was it merely coincidence? He could find no 'logical' explanation for the occurrence, so perhaps the question would have to remain unanswered - unless Spock could offer a solution. He would have to ask him later.

Glancing across at the quiet Vulcan sitting by his side, he realised that this mission had left its mark on each of them, had affected them all in one way or another. But in the end they had come through, faced up to their problems, learned a lot from their experiences, and had been drawn even closer together, if that were possible.

He felt Spock's steady gaze on him, and looked up to see understanding in the dark eyes. Spock nodded, briefly, before returning his attention to his console, and as the Columbus sped towards its rendezvous with the Enterprise, Kirk allowed himself to relax, the Melakron affair receding into the background of his mind, and becoming a hazy memory.

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#### SPOCK

In a cold and lonely childhood,  
Taught all feelings to abhor,  
The painful growth to manhood,  
Keeping closed the door.  
A questing thirst for knowledge;  
One emotion slips by,  
Curiosity...

The question - WHY?

Your chosen goal,  
The stars to roam,  
Neither culture your true home,  
Taught in childhood the man to be,  
Cool and calm each crisis see,  
'No emotion lives in me',

A lie...

Question - I?

At war within you'll always be,  
Until suppressed emotions free,  
Feed your soul, let it grow,  
Ask what you fear to know.  
You believe in the right to try.  
Is it so very wrong to cry?

Ask...

The question - WHY?

Alien or Human  
No man is whole,  
Without feeling  
An empty soul.

Ann Smith

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